Separate Peace: Why Ethnic Cleansing, Once Under Way, Is So Difficult to Reverse
By Daniel Pearl

KNIN, Croatia -- Dusan Dujic has a seemingly modest ambition: to die in his own house.

Mr. Dujic hasn't set foot in the small two-story home in this railroad town since he and thousands of other ethnic Serbs fled a Croatian army onslaught called "Operation Storm" in 1995. A city document confirms that he owns the building, but the ethnic Croatians occupying it won't budge, and Croatian officials refuse to evict them.

"I have no country except this one, and it doesn't want me," says Mr. Dujic, a 69-year-old former hotel manager, breaking into tears at a sidewalk cafe near his house. "I was a manager. I always had some money," he says. "Now I have to crawl around here like a dog."

Former co-worker Tatjana Grgic, an ethnic Croatian who works in the Red Cross office here, says Mr. Dujic was no Serb nationalist. "He was a good man," she says. "But the war has done what it has done. It's a normal thing."

Normal in the Balkans, perhaps. To Western countries, banishing ethnic minorities from a region is officially abhorrent. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has responded to Serbia's "ethnic cleansing" of Albanian minorities in the Serbian province of Kosovo with a punishing, four-week bombing campaign. The U.S. vows to return an estimated 600,000 Kosovo refugees to their homes.

Chasing a Pipe Dream

The experience of Croatia, Serbia's next-door neighbor, suggests that a massive return is a pipe dream. Croatia, which split from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991, has welcomed back fewer than 20% of its 350,000 departed Serbs. Almost all the returnees are elderly people wanting to claim pensions or be buried with their parents.

Serbs are "free to come," says Croatia's assistant foreign minister, Josip Paro. But while proclaiming that policy, Croatia encouraged ethnic Croatians to occupy Serb homes and stalled thousands of Serbs trying to get Croatian citizenship or reclaim their property. Now, it is helping Serbs unload their homes at a steep discount, and is building houses for ethnic Croat refugees in formerly Serb villages. "It's a slow, bureaucratic ethnic cleansing," charges Ivan Zvonimir Cicak, a Croatian opposition figure and human rights activist.

Ethnic cleansing tends to stick, and not only because of government policy. Younger Serbs have made new lives in Yugoslavia or in the Serbian-run section of Bosnia, another former Yugoslav republic. Others have emigrated to richer Western countries, or hope to keep their chances of emigration alive by preserving their refugee status. By some estimates, half of those who fled Croatia will never try to return.
Mines in Haystacks

Many Croatians, convinced that "war criminals" are coming back, predict trouble from returning Serbs. "I think they should be eliminated," says a Croatian soldier and Operation Storm participant who identifies himself only as Ante, drinking a beer during a rock concert in Knin to benefit war widows. Human-rights activists say several returning Serbs in a nearby village have been killed by fresh mines planted in haystacks.

Even some liberals wonder if separation is best. "We tried one way and it didn't work," says Zagreb architect Nikola Oreskovic, in a bus rolling past Croat villages destroyed by Serbs and Serb villages destroyed by Croats. "Maybe we should try another way.

Ethnic cleansing, horrible as it is, can be effective. Republika Srpska, an almost completely Serb ministate within Bosnia, has enjoyed relative tranquility and growing international acceptance, while tensions are rising between Muslims and Croats who live side by side in Bosnia. Croatia is poor but secure, and when it opened its airspace to NATO for the current bombing raids, the U.S. lifted an arms embargo, despite lingering concerns about Operation Storm.

An Efficient Operation

That operation was "the most efficient ethnic cleansing we've seen in the Balkans," says Carl Bildt, former European Community mediator in the Balkans. "There was a blinking yellow light given to it in 1995, and there hasn't really been any sustained international pressure to reverse it." One of the few critics of the operation, he says acquiescing to ethnic separation would be "horrifying" because the Balkans' ethnic patchwork is so complex.

Croatia denies any ethnic cleansing, noting that it urged Serbs to stay put during Operation Storm. But soldiers also shelled residential areas, killed civilians and let Croats burn and plunder Serb homes, according to a United Nations report. Many intact homes in Knin still bear the painted words "Croat--Don't Touch."

Serbs came here to the Krajina region in the 14th century, when the Turks routed them from Kosovo. The Austro-Hungarian empire gave the Serbs of Krajina (the name means "frontier") free land in exchange for defending the empire's eastern border from the Turks. Serbs became the city dwellers, and the majority in their region, despite Croatian fascists' attempts to exterminate Serbs during World War II. Krajina Serbs broke into armed rebellion in 1991 as Yugoslavia collapsed, and Knin, with its ancient hilltop fortress, became the capital of the Republic of Serbian Krajina.

The republic lasted four years and fell in four days. Knin's Serbs had just minutes to pack on Aug. 5, 1995, when their army warned them to leave. Many thought they would be back within a few days. Mr. Dujic says he was at his cousin's house at a nearby village. He had no time to
drive back to Knin to grab the family jewelry. Instead, he and his relatives took his son's car, which had the most gas, and drove to Belgrade, capital of Yugoslavia in the Republic of Serbia.

The Guroljevskis Move

The flight of about 200,000 Krajina Serbs set off an ethnic chain reaction. Many refugees pushed east into Serb-held territory in Bosnia. In the city of Banja Luka, Josipu Guroljevski, an ethnic Croat, says Serbs pounded on his door Aug. 16 and told him to leave the following morning or die. He and his wife, Stazji, spent a month as refugees before hearing of empty houses in Knin. Croatia gave citizenship to any ethnic Croatian, and eventually 6,000 Croatians from Bosnia would settle in and around Knin.

The Guroljevskis say they went to City Hall and got a list of available houses. Mr. Dujic's house was in the best repair, with room for relatives upstairs. The furniture was overturned, the rooms looted and humid; but after painting and repair, the house became the Guroljevski's home, with an official occupancy permit. A Virgin Mary hangs on the wall. Potted plants sit outside the door.

Mr. Dujic says he wrote a letter to Knin in October 1995, saying he wanted to come back. But even when Croatia allowed Serbs to return, it made it difficult for them to get Croatian citizenship: One consulate where refugees went to get Croatian papers wouldn't allow anybody to enter without Croatian papers, Western officials say. By April 1997, Mr. Dujic had his papers and was staying with his wife in a friend's house as he tried to reclaim the home he had built nearly four decades before.

"Let him wait. We're waiting, too," says Stazji Guroljevski, in Mr. Dujic's living room. She says a Serb is occupying her newly built home in Banja Luka, and "for me they're all the same." Even if their home were empty, the Guroljevskis say fears for their safety would keep them away. And they say they can't afford to buy another home in Croatia, because Mr. Guroljevski received just one month's salary last year from his work as a night watchman at a defunct factory. They might consider a free home, but, "we don't want something worse than this," says Mrs. Guroljevski.

'A Piece of Paper'

Many ethnic Serbs, tired of waiting, are selling out their interests to Croatia's new government Agency for Property Negotiation. One private agent, Augustin Blazevic, says Serbs get about half the value of their homes because "nobody wants to buy a house with somebody inside." Mr. Dujic says he won't sell out.

Croatia, under international pressure, set up housing commissions last year to decide who owns a house and tell the temporary occupier to move somewhere else. On Jan. 15, Mr. Dujic won his decision from Knin's Housing Commission. "This is a piece of paper that means nothing," he says.
Indeed, the Knin Housing Commission has received 585 applications and reviewed 80 cases since September, keeping them in thin yellow folders, but it has returned only eight homes to owners. International monitors say none of those homes were occupied. Knin officials say Croatia's plan doesn't require them to evict people if no other homes are ready.

"We have to be patient," says Ivo Jazinovic, a Croat from Bosnia who is chairman of Knin's five-member (three Croats, two Serbs) housing commission. "Every case that the housing commission works on, it's deciding at least three destinies." Mr. Jazinovic, a 35-year-old engineer with a ready grin, himself occupied a vacated Knin apartment under a law that gave Croats tenancy rights if the renter was gone for more than six months. He knows of only one Croat who has gone back to Banja Luka since the war ended, and says, "My personal attitude in life is that man has to go forward, not backward."

'Ethnic Engineering'

To provide new homes, Croatia presented a $2.5 billion housing plan to international donors in December, but collected just $25 million. Donors are hesitant partly because Croatia is doing "ethnic engineering" as it builds, says Branimir Radev, a monitor with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

A case in point is Kistanje, a village near Knin, where the Croatian government has helped move ethnic-Croat immigrants from Kosovo into buildings owned by Serbs. The village is a bizarre mix of burned-out, roofless brick hulks (on one wall sarcastic graffiti proclaims: "We Repaired This for the Owner") and well-lighted clothing boutiques. Some businesses carry the name Janjevo, the town in Kosovo from which most of Kistanje hails.

In a pizzeria, owner Vinko Mazarekic turns down his Rod Stewart compact disk and explains how he arrived. Kosovo's gold and silver mines attracted Croatian settlers centuries before, but Croats as well as Albanians suffered recent persecution. Mr. Mazarekic left in 1993, traveled around Croatia, and finally decided to go to Kistanje because of government aid and low taxes. The government repaired the roof and floor of the bar he occupied, he says. Mr. Mazarekic belittles the returning Serbs.

"They want to expel people who have seven or eight children, to leave everything because of one old man," he says, shaking his head. "We just want to do something useful. It's time to leave us alone."

That's pretty much what Croatia is doing. The government recently started building 170 tidy brick homes in Kistanje. The U.S. has promised $200,000 for the infrastructure. Croatia initially said new ethnic-Croat immigrants from Kosovo would get the homes, but Western officials protested, so Croatia agreed to reserve 20 homes for returning Serbs.
Croatia has deflected most diplomatic pressure. Dusan Karanovic, a Serb who returned to Kistanje in 1996 only to be evicted from his home by ethnic Croats, gained support from two U.S. ambassadors and the Croatian ombudsman. Still, his Zagreb lawyer, Slobodan Budak, says the case has bounced around the bureaucracy so much that he isn't sure where it now stands. "It's complicated, on purpose," he says.

Renaming the Streets

The Krajina region seems in little danger of going Serb. Before the war, 11% of the citizens in the Knin municipality were Croats. Now Knin is half the size, and 71% Croat. Streets have new Croatian names. At the police station, where a dozen elderly Serbs line up each morning to get documents signed, all the officers are Croats. Serbian staff members were cleared from the hospital and schools as well, and replaced with Croats from Bosnia, says Knin economist and activist Nevena Zunjic.

Residents compete for economic crumbs. The region has rocky soil, a moribund railroad and a small factory that makes screws. Most people live from government handouts of about $100 a month, and even that has been drying up. Croatians from Bosnia say they are second-class citizens because they don't qualify for the free heating-wood and fertilizer given to returning Serbs. The few young Serbs trickling in say they are avoiding being drafted or bombed in Serbia.

Elsewhere, Krajina Serbs are looking abroad. In Bar, a port town on the coast of the Yugoslavia republic Montenegro, Serbs recently petitioned the U.N. to go to Western Europe, as some Kosovar refugees are doing. Some Serbs came to Bar because it was the last stop on the railroad line when they fled Croatia. They occupied some abandoned wooden shacks called "the barracks," and they survive by selling fish or cigarettes.

Among the barracks residents is Ranka Milosevic, 43, who owned a tavern in the Croatian mountain town of Slunj. She says a lawyer is trying to retrieve her home from the Croatian villager who occupied it. She wants to sell it. When Ms. Milosevic visited Slunj last year, she says neighbors had her arrested. "I'll never go back," she says, shaking her head. "We all want to go abroad somewhere."

In Slunj, neighbors dispute her account. Across the town square from Ms. Milosevic's house, a Catholic church that was burned during the 1991 Serb uprising is still being repaired. In the rectory, over brandy, Rev. Petar Bogut notes that the law says nobody should lose property, the church says to love your enemy, and no one accuses Ms. Milosevic of atrocities. Still, he says, covering his face with his hands, "maybe it would be best for her" to stay away.

Updated April 22, 1999 12:53 a.m. EST