BREAKING THE SILENCE;SURVIVORS OF SERB RAPE CAMP OVERCOME CULTURAL TABOOS TO TELL THEIR STORY TO THE WORLD Chicago Tribune September 14, 1997 Sunday, CHICAGOLAND FINAL EDITION

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BYLINE: By **Theresa Agovino.** Special to the Tribune.

DATELINE: ZAGREB, Croatia

BODY:
Like many friendships, the relationship between Jadranka Cigelj and Nusreta Sivac was born of a common experience. Their shared past was spent at the Omarska concentration camp in northern Bosnia where they were repeatedly raped and beaten along with 37 other women.

Five women didn't survive the torture. No one knows how many men died at the camp. To honor the women who died, to publicize the atrocities committed during the four-year war in the Balkans and to reassert the dignity and strength their Serb captors tried to strip from them, the two decided to tell their story in the film "Calling the Ghosts."

"I just felt a need to talk. They made me an object during the war. It wasn't my will, and I wanted to do something that was my will," said Cigelj. "My silence was strangling me," Sivac added. "I decided if I didn't tell, no one would know what happened there."

"Calling the Ghosts," which was shown on Cinemax earlier this year and in various film festivals, received favorable reviews. It is expected to be shown on Bosnian television soon. The film follows the women for three years as their struggle to confront their pain transforms them into activists who fight for the rights of women and refugees and for the arrest of indicted war criminals. They have described their plight to everyone from the Council on Foreign Relations to journalists to movie audiences to the secretary-general of the United Nations.

Their tireless efforts are having an impact on the Balkan peace process. This is the first time in history that rape is being considered a war crime. In 1995, the two testified in the Hague about what happened to them at Omarska.

NATO troops have begun arresting Bosnian Serb suspects, and on July 10, British soldiers killed Simo Drljaca, one of the men believed to have had a role in running the death camps in northern Bosnia, as they were trying to arrest him. "I only wish

they captured him so he could have stood trial," Sivac said.

Rape was a weapon in the arsenal of ethnic cleansing the Serbs used during the war. Tens of thousands of women were attacked in camps or in their homes, but experts say that no one knows how many women were victimized since few came forward.

A report by the United Nations Center for Human Rights says women of child-bearing age were often targeted for rape so they would give birth to a Serb child. Once pregnant, the women were kept from having abortions.

Some women felt like they were being attacked again when the press latched onto the story in 1993 and pushed for gory details, said Maja Mamula, counselor at the Center for Women War Victims in Zagreb.

Cigelj and Sivac stand out in their willingness to speak publicly about their ordeal. Most women have remained silent.

Now that the war is over and women are trying to rebuild their lives, they are suffering from posttraumatic stress from being raped, from losing family members, from being forced from their homes and from living in refugee camps. However, international aid is focused on rebuilding, with little money for psycho-social help.

"Trauma is not a priority for the international aid agencies anymore, but this is the first time many women have had time to really start to think about what happened to them," Mamula said.

Last year, there were eight therapists for the 11 community centers run by the Bosnian Committee for Help. Now there are only three because donors want to fund projects that will help reintegrate women into society, such as job training initiatives.

"If a woman's psychological condition is poor, she isn't going to be able to reintegrate into society. It is hard to make people understand that," said Nejira Nalic, director of the Bosnian Committee for Help. Meanwhile women continue to have symptoms of post-traumatic stress: nightmares, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, depression, aggressive behavior.

Few can empathize with the women as much as Cigelj and Sivac because they know how hard it is to speak up. Both said they struggled with the decision to speak.

Each was deeply depressed after being released in August 1992 from Omarska, where they had spent three months. Cigelj stayed in her house, afraid to move for 22 days. Sivac said she was afraid to let anyone touch her. "I felt like I was wearing a sign that said, 'I was in a death camp' and that people didn't want to come near me," Sivac recalled.

Each wondered how their friends and family would react and feared their actions could adversely affect family members still in Serb territory.

"At first I didn't want my mother to talk. I said 'why you?' I was afraid, afraid of the Serbs, afraid of the shame," said Cigelj's 24-year-old son, Mickey Jakimovski. "But we talked about it and I thought about it. I thought it was important for her."

Such strong family support and their legal backgrounds fostered their willingness to

speak. Cigelj is a lawyer; Sivac a judge.

"I understood the law, so it was easier for me than for other people to figure out how we could do something about what happened," said Sivac.

But Cigelj said the more she reflected on her experience, she realized victims needed a voice if there was to be any justice. Western nations had not taken strong action against the Serbs despite the revelations about the concentration camp. In some sense, Cigelj said, she understood the West's inertia.

"When I would see horrible stories about things going on in Africa, I never thought about it. It seemed so far away, and then it happens to you," Cigelj said. "I wanted people to understand what it felt like to be in Bosnia then. . . . to understand how it isn't something that just happens to people far away."

Cigelj left Bosnia for Croatia soon after she was released and began working for International Society for Human Rights, a German non-profit agency where she spent her first few years of freedom gathering testimony from victims of war crimes and where she now helps refugees.

Sivac became the other focus of the film because other women from the camp were too shy to appear or dropped out because they found the process too painful. But like Cigelj, Sivac was channeling her anger in a positive way. Sivac lives in Sanski Most, which is in the part of Bosnia controlled by Muslims and Croats, where she is the local director of Organization of Bosnia and Herzegovina Women, which aids refugees in finding housing, family members and jobs.

Sivac and Cigelj said speaking about their ordeal and aiding refugees in their quest to regain control of their lives had provided satisfaction and solace. But Omarska haunts them, and they believe it always will.

"I know I look fine," said Cigelj. "But I've seen so many ugly things. It will probably get easier as time goes on. But until it gets easier, you live with it."

GRAPHIC: PHOTOS 2PHOTOS (color): Jadranka Cigelj (left) and Nusreta Sivac speak out about their ordeal in "Calling the Ghosts." Photos for the Tribune by Theresa Agovino.

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