

Deep wounds

by [Janet Varner Gunn](#) in the [November 18, 1998](#) issue

By Chuck Sudetic, Blood and Vengeance: One Family's Story of the War in Bosnia. (Norton, 393 pp.)

In her 1961 account of the Adolf Eichmann trial, Hannah Arendt wrote about the "holes of oblivion" into which the Third Reich intended to make its victims disappear. But communicating the experience of terror to others involves frustration, risk and uncertainty. Can the horrific reality be rescued from oblivion? The atrocities committed when Serbs attacked the Croatian city of Vukovar in 1991 took place less than a morning's drive from Vienna, but for many in the West they might just as well have happened in the fictional jungles of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Like many of his Western colleagues, journalist Chuck Sudetic had distanced himself from the events he was assigned to cover in Bosnia. "It was in Vukovar that I consciously climbed into an observation tower for the first time to look down on the doings of man in his world as if his race were nothing but the wildlife on a great plain." But in the course of listening to the story of a family's experience of the war, Sudetic climbed down from that tower and penetrated the "deep structure" of the conflict.

Sudetic met the Muslim family of Huso and Hiba Celik toward the end of his five-year assignment in Bosnia. He had been related to the family since the mid-1980s, when his wife's sister, a Serb he had met during a Fulbright year in Belgrade, married the Celik's oldest son. In a September 1995 conversation that went on for days in a grimy farmhouse outside Tuzla, the surviving members of the family shared with their Croatian-American relative stories that went back to feudalism under the Ottomans, and included tales of the traumas of two world wars, of guns buried to be used another day, and of the blood and vengeance the dead require. In their "myriad of characters and contradictions," these stories "gave a glimpse of how Bosnia had come to be, how it survived . . . how it struggled to lift itself from poverty and ignorance, how its bitter, living memories were stirred as the communist world collapsed, and how a small group of men bent on taking and keeping personal power ignited its passions and blew a country apart."

More important than the book's running profiles of that small group of leaders whose names continue to make the front pages (Slobodan Milosevic, Franjo Tudjman, Radko Mladic, Radovan Karadzic) are Sudetic's accounts of the villagers, mostly Muslim, behind the headlines. Especially poignant are the stories about the women who continued to meet at the spring near the mosque--and who later took in each other's orphans--while the men were biding their time in silence and drunkenness until they could take revenge for old wounds and insults.

Hiba Celik's story frames *Blood and Vengeance*. It begins with her entrusting some bedding to the keeping of a Serb neighbor when the families fled from their mountain village, and it ends with her return to the village, accompanied by Sudetic, to recover it. Sudetic concludes with an account of the broken trust between two women. The neighbor gave back inferior bedding with neither explanation nor apology. It was one more instance, and for Hiba Celik possibly the most deeply wounding, in an endless list of betrayals--by international tribunals, by governments, by leaders, by neighbors. It is no wonder that the lowest circle of Dante's hell is reserved not for murderers, but for the betrayers of trust.