

GRANTA



The Last Place on Earth



## Pictures from the War

*by Maggie O'Kane, Granta Magazine No 44*

I met Thomas Kern in the lobby of the Al-Rashid Hotel in Baghdad the morning after the first bombing raid. He and two other photographers had been arrested by the Iraqis, questioned and then released – rattled but safe.

We met again in southern Turkey the following spring. The world was saving the Kurds, and Kern disappeared into the mountains for four months to record what saving the Kurds really meant. He stayed there long after the journalists, the photographers, the television crews and the Minister for Overseas Development, Lady Chalker, in her yellow Wellingtons, got fed up and left them to it.

The last time we met was in Sarajevo at Christmas. Kern was two months into the assignment laid out in these pages. Although we spent long periods in the same places, we rarely ran into each other. When my fellow hacks came together in the Holiday Inn for heat, electricity and a reprieve from the misery, he was not with us. And when the hack pack called greetings to returned friends as they wandered into the dining room, few knew Thomas Kern.

His pictures are a testimony to his self-imposed exile from the comfort of the familiar, to the months that he spent buried in the hard end of the story and to the trust he built up with his subjects through the long nights they spent together in the darkness

of the Sarajevo winter. He is a photographer who lives with people and becomes a part of their lives.

I recognize the worn look on the face of the man standing at his door with wood, his arm crooked defensively. I saw it so many times in Sarajevo as the winter months of 1992 dragged on into the New Year. People's bodies were shrinking from the inside, recoiling from death, fear, hunger and cold. As a journalist, I never managed to describe that shrinking away, but Thomas Kern's pictures do.

The open-mouthed mother with her hair gently blow-dried and her neat black leather gloves should be promenading along the smart cobbled streets of old Sarajevo. Instead she is watching her neighbours tearing each other apart for bits of wood. She looks straight into Thomas Kern's camera as if to ask: "What is happening to all of us?"

The Red Cross says the refugees are . . . Refugee is now a dead word. But looking at Kern's pictures of the old couple on their blanket, the man with his cardboard box, reminds me of all the school halls, factory floors and sheds where the refugees spread out their lives on the floor. In Zenica I remember an old woman building a shelf with a plank and two empty jam tins. In the corner of the rancid school gym she was trying to recreate the kitchen which she had lived in and had never expected to leave, the kitchen of the home that someone for some reason came and burned down.

The picture of the pig and the soldiers at the crossroads is in some ways the most frightening. There is a lack of control about the scene: in a minute, one of the soldiers might blow the pig's head off. Tomorrow, as humanity recedes a little further, it might be a woman who is prodded at the crossroads. I remember one soldier describing how he raped a woman on the curb. And how afterwards her mother and her sister found her and pulled down the shreds of the woman's dress to make her decent. The pig at the crossroad is a warning.

As I was writing this introduction Thomas rang. We talked about his pictures. He says they are about despair. His favourite is the boy holding the camera, his eyes asking: what am I doing here? Thomas' achievement is to have captured this despair, and the confusion of ordinary people forced to live and love and die in the middle of a battlefield.