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***Special Edition**: Srebrenica 30 Years Later*

30th Anniversary of the Srebrenica Genocide:
Pain and Perseverance, Remembering and Moving Forward

RUTGERS
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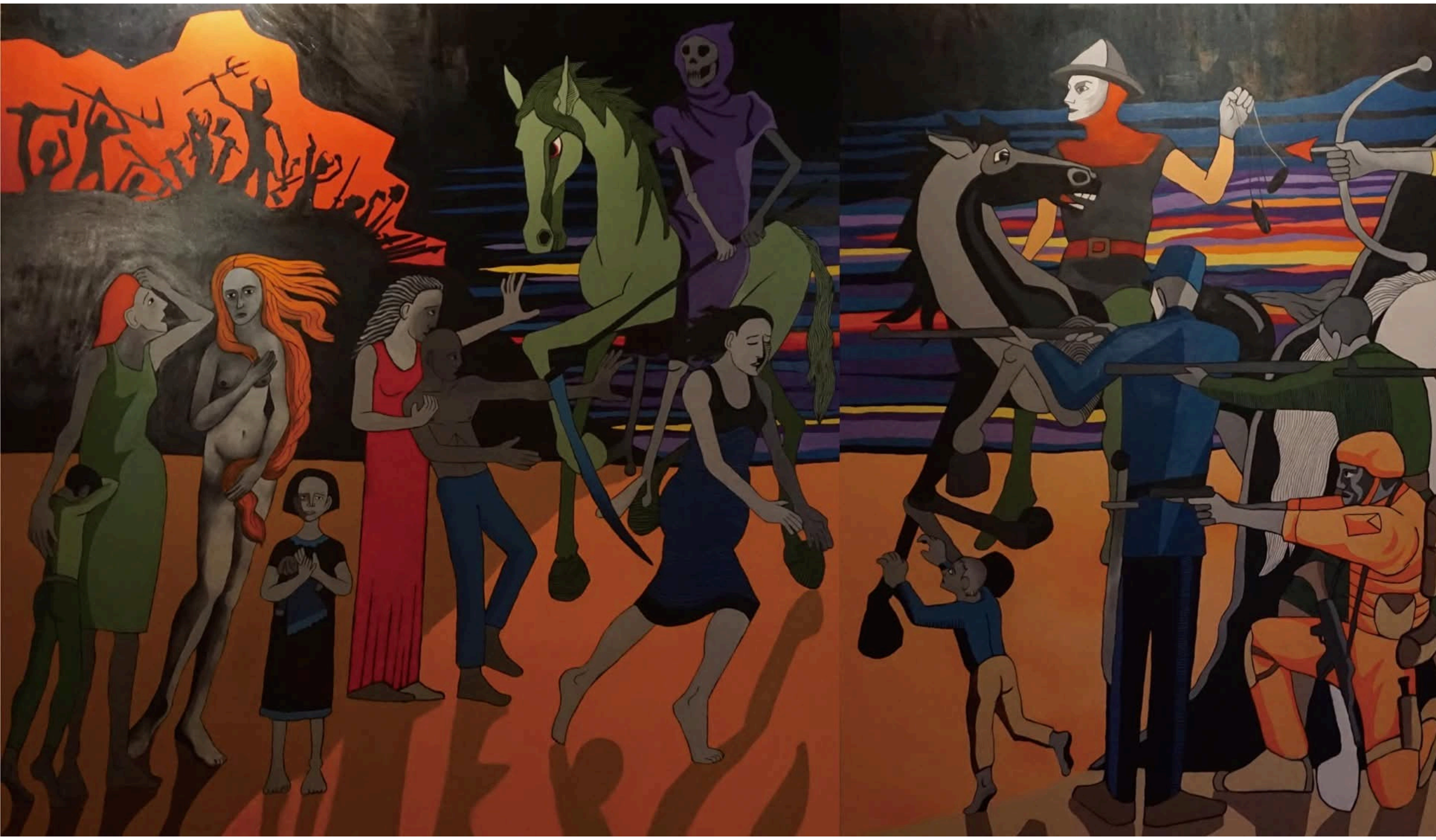

"History Repeats Itself" by Eldin Smajlović

The views expressed within this issue are those of the individual contributors and do not reflect the position of Rutgers University.

Table of Contents

Background, Dr. Sarah Snyder and Bekir Hodžić 8
Editor's Note, Dr. Sarah Snyder 10
The Messiness of Belonging, Dr. Sandra Grudić 12
History Repeats Itself, Eldin Smajlović 16
History Rhymes Itself, Eldin Smajlović 20
Mothers of Srebrenica, Velma Šarić 24
Srebrenica, Then and Now, Dr. Hikmet Karčić 29

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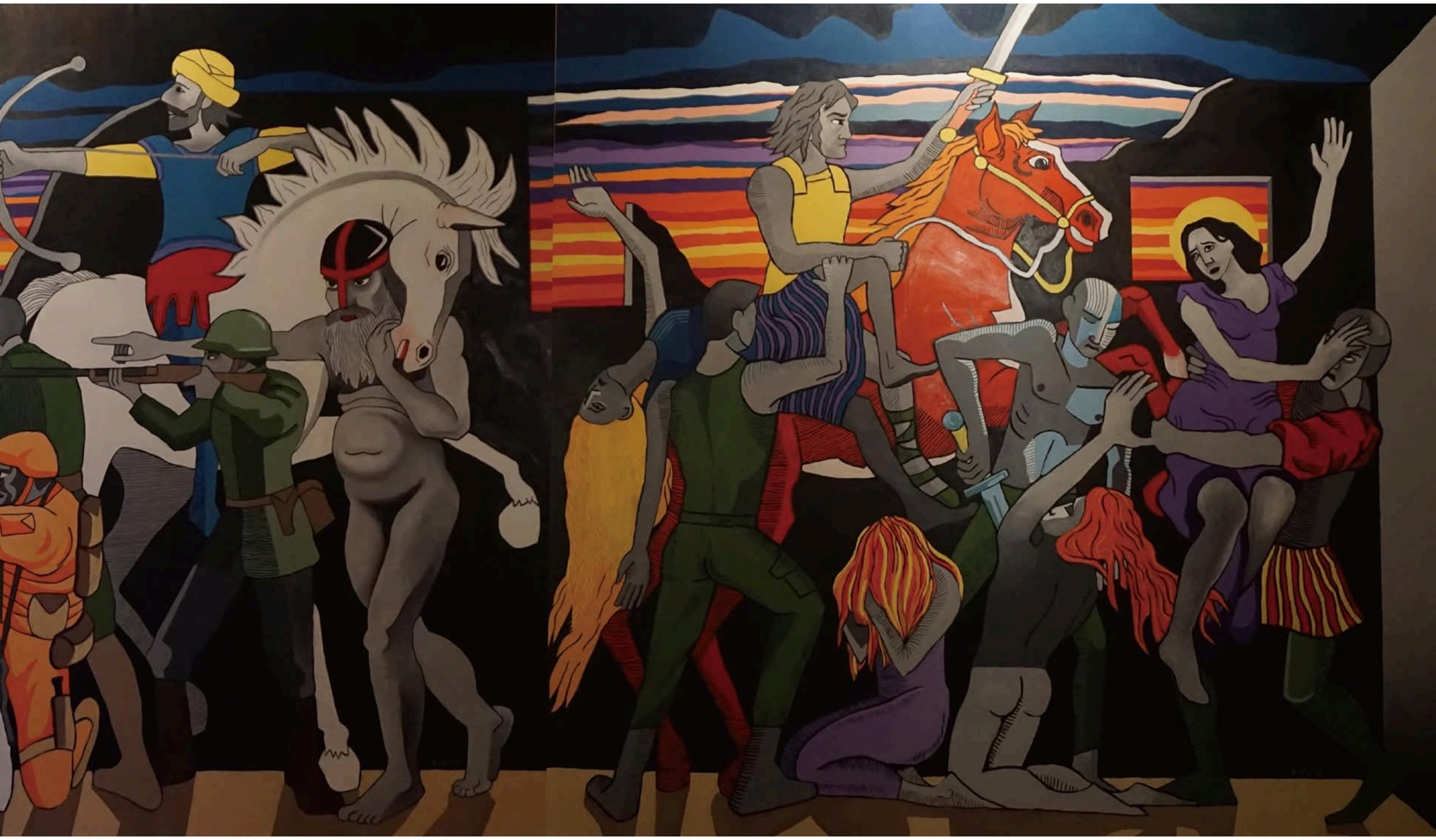

“History Repeats Itself” by Eldin Smajlović

Table of Contents, cont’d.

Dr. Hasan Nuhanović Interview 31

Educating Through Memory, Catherine Masud 38

An Appeal for Justice, Dr. David Pettigrew 43

Carrying the Silence, Erna Alić 46

Seeds (Sjeme), Erna Alić 50

Understanding the Bosnian *Kataklizma*, Bekir Hodžić 52

Humanities Curriculum, Dr. Sarah Snyder and Bekir Hodžić 56

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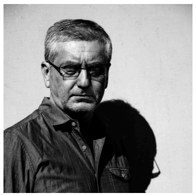

Photo Credit: Febe Meijnen

Dr. Hasan Nuhanović

Hasan Nuhanović (b. 1968) is a globally acknowledged advocate for truth, justice, and recognition for victims of the Bosnian genocide. A survivor of the Srebrenica genocide, he served as a interpreter for United Nations peacekeepers in the safe zone. After the town fell to Bosnian-Serb forces, he managed to escape, but not without his entire immediate family—mother, father, and brother—being handed over to those forces by U.N. soldiers. They were all later killed in the genocide. Since surviving, Hasan has dedicated himself to various advocacy efforts centered on the genocide: these include founding the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center, providing evidence before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and successfully suing the Dutch government for their negligence in Srebrenica. He has written several books on his experiences, makes regular International media appearances to discuss the Bosnian genocide, and recently completed his PhD at RMIT University.

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Isabel Chenoweth/SCSU

Dr. David Pettigrew

David Pettigrew, Ph.D., is a Connecticut State University Professor at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven Connecticut, where he has taught since 1987. He currently serves as Chair of the Philosophy Department. Pettigrew regularly teaches an “Introduction to Holocaust and Genocide Studies“ course that he created in 2013. Pettigrew lectures and writes about the aggression and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In May 2025, for example, he presented a keynote lecture at the conference “"Ripples of Conflict-related Sexual Violence in 21st century Europe: Experiences from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Ukraine,” held in Stockholm at the offices of the European Commission Representation to Sweden. In 2020, his article, "Mandate Interrupted: The Problematic Legacy of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia,” appeared in Washington University Global Studies Law Review. He has written open letters to international officials, as well as op-ed essays advocating for the human right of survivors of the genocide and other war crimes to install memorials at atrocity sites in Republika Srpska where such memorials have been forbidden. In 2019, he was appointed to the Connecticut Holocaust and Genocide Education Advisory Committee. Pettigrew serves on the Advisory Board of the Yale University Genocide Studies Program.

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Dr. Sarah Snyder, Editor

Dr. Sarah Snyder is a visiting scholar at the Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights at Rutgers University. As a scholar-practitioner she has worked extensively on issues of public memory, testimony, and intergenerational trauma within the framework of genocide studies. Her research focuses on the perceptions of time in relation to survivorship and intergenerational survivorship, as well as transitions of memory through time and space. Snyder's book The Continual Trauma of Survivorship: The Historical Complexities of Time Constructs was published with Purdue in December 2025. Her current projects include developing curricula on the Bosnian Genocide, and co-editing her book Genocide Studies: Through the Eyes of Intergenerational Survivors. She has previously conducted research on museology and worked in the conservation department at Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau. Snyder is currently an instructor at Broome Community College and Goodwin University where she teaches courses in History, Memory Studies, and Cultural Anthropology. She also is a Founding member of Collaborative Social Change. She holds PhD in History of Ideas with a concentration in Holocaust Studies from the University of Texas at Dallas. She completed her Master of Arts in Cultural Anthropology with a concentration on museology at the University at Buffalo.

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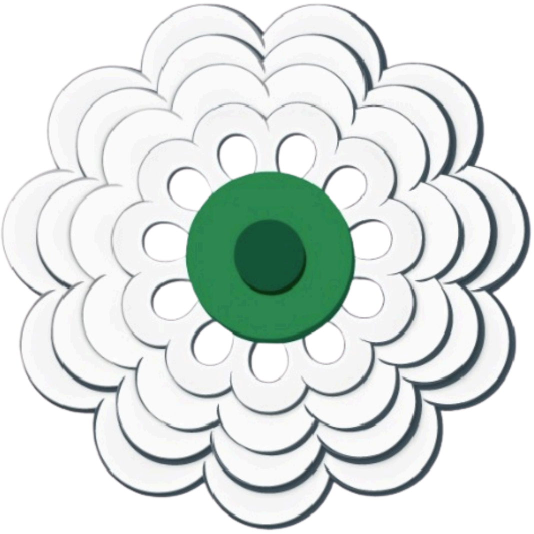
Ova publikacija je posvećena Haši Hodžić (1945-2025), čijeg su supruga Avdu Hodžića i sina Bekira Hodžića ubili vojnici bosanskih Srba u genocidu u Srebrenici u Julu 1995.



This publication is dedicated to Haša Hodžić (1945-2025), whose husband, Avdo Hodžić, and son, Bekir Hodžić, were killed by Bosnian-Serb soldiers during the Srebrenica genocide in July 1995.

BACKGROUND

By Dr. Sarah Snyder and Bekir Hodžić

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a small Southeastern European country located on the Balkan Peninsula. It was once part of Yugoslavia, a multi-ethnic federation that included it and the surrounding countries; and Bosnia was one of the most diverse countries within that union, with a population split among Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats. Starting in the 1990s, economic, political, and social instability caused several states to secede from Yugoslavia. Following an independence referendum in 1992, Bosnia declared its independence. But after it did so, Bosnian-Serb militias—who wanted to conquer land across the country to form an ethnically pure "Greater Serbia"—rose up across Bosnia, launching the Bosnian war and genocide. While the forces targeted Bosniaks and other non-Serbs, they primarily focused on the first group. They deported non-Serbs from their homes, destroyed culturally relevant buildings like mosques, founded concentration camps, committed systematic mass sexual violence, and killed individuals in massacres by the hundreds.

This conflict would last for years, and so too would its violence. But perhaps the Bosnian war and genocide's most seminal moment came on July 11, 1995, when Bosnian-Serb units captured Srebrenica, a safe area in Bosnia's east supposedly protected by the United Nations. It housed an estimated 40,000 Bosniak refugees and a small, 600-person Dutch unit of UN peacekeepers. After they overran the town, these soldiers, under the direction of General Ratko Mladić, implemented a genocidal program. First, they deported the town's women, children, and elderly—not, however, without killing and assaulting many. Next, they gathered and captured the remaining Bosniak males, who varied in age from sixteen to ninety-four, and held over 8,000 of them in detention sites. Finally, they killed those Bosniak men and boys, throwing their bodies into mass graves. These events became known as the Srebrenica genocide.

Srebrenica shocked the world. It, critically, caused the United States to orchestrate a NATO bombing campaign on vital Bosnian-Serb military positions, an action that, alongside military gains from the Bosnian-Croat resistance and other factors, ended the war and genocide in 1995. When the smoke cleared, the destruction was immense: 2,000,000 displaced, over 100,000 dead Bosnians, and a country shattered. Of the conflict's atrocities, 90% were later linked to Bosnian-Serb paramilitaries, and of the killed, about 65% were Bosniak, 25% Serb, and 8% Croat.

With peace came various initiatives that arose to seek justice for the victims of the Bosnian war and genocide. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), international legal tribunals, would indict, try, and find many individuals guilty of crimes in Bosnia, while further ruling that Srebrenica constituted genocide. Their judicial work persists now via the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) and local courts. Scientists, moreover, initiated one of the modern era's most extensive forensic investigations, unearthing mass graves across the nation and putting their residents to rest—though that work continues today. And memorials dedicated to the Bosnian war and genocide, its victims, and its survivors litter the region's landscape, with the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center standing as the largest. But problems like political dysfunction, ethnic polarization, and genocide denial still plague the country, and Bosnia's violence still comprises a living tragedy.

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4
5
6

EDITOR’S NOTE

By Dr. Sarah Snyder

2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica Genocide, but as you'll read, the passage of three decades does not erase, and instead, in many ways, deepens the impact of this atrocity. Time has not diminished the loss felt by families still searching for answers, nor has it silenced the imperative to commemorate. Rather, these thirty years have revealed the complex, ongoing work of remembrance: how communities rebuild amid absence, how trauma reverberates across generations, and how the act of commemoration itself becomes a form of resistance against denial and forgetting.

In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces under the command of General Ratko Mladić systematically murdered more than 8,000 Bosniak men and boys in and around the town of Srebrenica, in what was supposed to be a United Nations "safe area." Over the course of several days, men and boys were separated from women, children, and the elderly, loaded onto buses, and executed in fields, warehouses, and schools. Their bodies were buried in mass graves, many of which were later dug up and relocated to secondary and tertiary sites in an attempt to conceal the crime. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and later international courts, ruled this massacre as genocide, the worst atrocity on European soil since World War II.

With this significant anniversary, this edition brings together the voices of those who have dedicated themselves to commemorating, memorializing, and educating others about the Genocide in Bosnia. More specifically, we gather the testimonies and reflections of survivors who carry the weight of lived experience; artists who transform grief into powerful acts of creation; scholars who contextualize these events within broader histories of violence and humanity; intergenerational survivors navigating inherited trauma and resilience; educators working to ensure these lessons reach new audiences; museum professionals who curate spaces of memory and learning; and activists fighting against genocide denial and for justice that remains incomplete.

Together, these voices illuminate the multifaceted journey that is the commemoration of the Srebrenica Genocide and wider Genocide in Bosnia. This is not a single narrative but many voices, each offering distinct insights into how we remember, why we remember, and what it means to carry forward the responsibility of "never again" in a world where such promises remain fragile. Through their words, we see that commemoration is not a static monument but a living, evolving practice: one that demands our continued attention, our moral courage, and our commitment to truth even when it is uncomfortable.

As you engage with these contributions, you will encounter pain and perseverance, absence and presence, the wounds that persist and the strength that emerges from them. This edition stands as both a memorial and a call to action, a reminder that the work of remembrance is never complete, and that each generation must choose how it will honor those who were lost and stand with those who survived.

Three decades later, the fight for truth continues. Genocide denial remains pervasive and institutionalized, particularly within Republika Srpska, the Bosnian Serb entity, where officials continue to dispute the characterization of Srebrenica as genocide despite international court rulings. Schools in the region often teach revisionist histories that minimize or erase the atrocity entirely. In recent years, this denial has intensified, with political leaders glorifying convicted war criminals and undermining commemorative efforts. Yet there have also been significant legal developments that reaffirm the international community's commitment to justice and truth. In 2024, the United Nations General Assembly designated July 11 as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica, a resolution that faced fierce opposition but ultimately passed, establishing a global framework for remembrance. Additionally, ongoing efforts to locate and identify the remaining missing persons continue, with forensic teams still exhuming remains and DNA analysis bringing closure to families who have waited decades to bury their loved ones with dignity.

This edition is dedicated to the 8,372 victims of the Srebrenica Genocide: the fathers, sons, brothers, uncles, and friends whose lives were stolen in an act of unspeakable hatred. And we further dedicate it to the tens of thousands of other human beings—men, women, the young, the old, and more—slaughtered in the Bosnian War and Genocide's broader violences. We honor their memory and stand in solidarity with their families, the Mothers of Srebrenica, and all survivors who carry the burden of this loss. We dedicate this work to those who continue to search for the missing, to those who refuse to let the truth be buried, and to future generations who inherit the responsibility of remembrance. May their stories never be forgotten. May justice prevail. May we never allow such darkness to descend again.

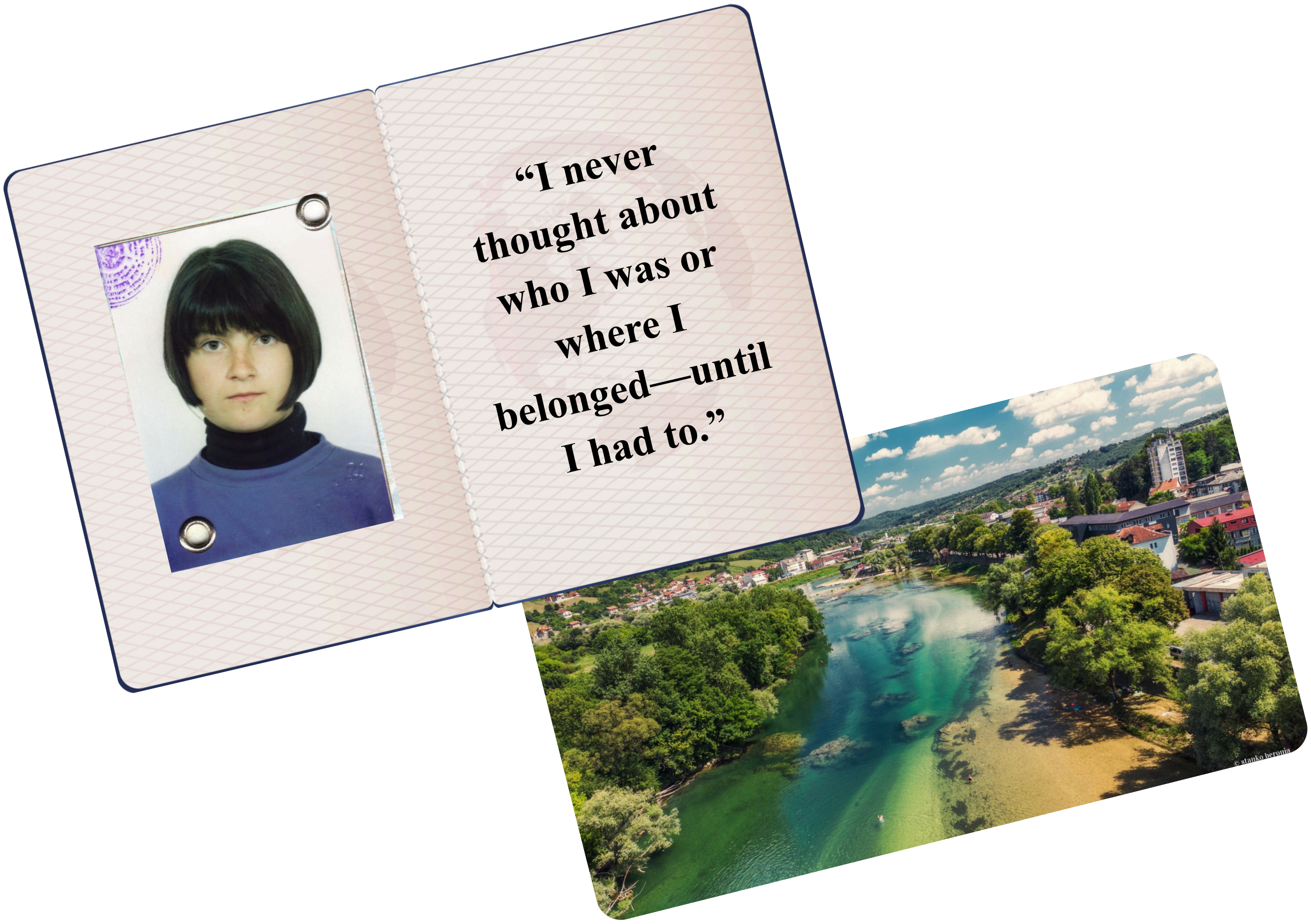
THE MESSINESS OF BELONGING

By Dr. Sandra Grudić

My name is Sandra. I have a rather boring, inconsequential name. My mom chose it because Sandra was the name of her favorite singer's daughter. My sister, then three years old, said that if I were a boy, she would name me "Dragan," a traditional Orthodox Christian name, but if I were a girl, I'd be Sandra. I thanked the heavens many times that I turned out a girl. To this day, when I introduce myself to Bosnians of any background, I thank my parents and sister for giving me a name by which no one can determine my ethnicity, and no people or land can claim me as "theirs." As long as I can remember, I never wanted to belong to anyone or anything by association. Such a strong position on "belonging" crystallized through many challenging experiences.

I come from Bosanski Novi, a small, beautiful town in northwestern Bosnia, just the width of the River Una away from Croatia. Like most children, I never thought about who I was or where I belonged—until I had to. By the time the war started in Bosnia in spring 1992, I had spent twelve years in Bosanski Novi. I had known all my friends since early childhood, and our neighbors had lived in the same homes since before I was born. Until I was eleven, I did not have a passport. Until I was thirteen, I had never left Yugoslavia. Like my parents, I considered myself geographically Bosnian and by citizenship, Yugoslav. I never thought of my mom as a Serb, or my dad as a Bosniak, or myself as a mix of the two. It was normal that one grandmother wore a hijab and the other did not.

But then came 1992. Yugoslavia fell apart, so I couldn't be a Yugoslav anymore. Bosnia became independent that spring, and the war soon followed. What I considered my home was engulfed in neighborhood violence, and my lifelong neighbors and friends were not necessarily friendly anymore, and some were outright dangerous. It suddenly became extremely important what name one had, what ethnicity one "belonged" to or identified oneself as. After April 1992, Serbs controlled northwestern Bosnia, and non-Serbs—mainly Bosniaks and Croats—were persecuted. The goal was to create ethnically clean areas in Croatia and Bosnia, removing non-Serbs by all means, before then seceding and joining what remained of Yugoslavia.



"I never thought about who I was or where I belonged—until I had to."

© stanko beronja

That spring, my father was fired from his job for being Muslim, like most other non-Serbs. Soon he, along with all the men from his family, was taken to a concentration camp, while the women and children from the Japra Valley —a cluster of villages within the municipality of Bosanski Novi, including my father's home village of Blagaj Rijeka—were expelled in cattle cars to central Bosnia. After his release from the camp, a convoy with most of the non-Serbs from the area left for Croatia. As we gathered to say goodbye to loved ones preparing to flee, my mother was shot. She survived, but her injury meant we had to stay behind, while nearly everyone we knew left. We remained in Bosanski Novi through what became the longest, hardest year of my life—marked by food shortages, no electricity or running water, no heating, and very few people I knew, and even fewer I trusted.

We escaped in June 1993. By then, I knew leaving meant survival, and that I'd rather be anywhere than in Bosanski Novi. I was exhausted from stereotyping, bullying, fear, and uncertainty. I felt betrayed by the place and people I called home. Why should it matter that I was leaving if home no longer wanted me? What did it mean to belong here, if staying alive required me to be something I refused to be—a Serb of singular identity? In the end, it didn't matter who I thought I was, but only how others saw me.

We ended up in Germany as refugees for five years. School was strange at first. There was bullying, but I barely paid attention. By then, I had given up on seeking acceptance. Name-calling no longer hurt; being "different" was becoming the core of my identity. At least my name was easy to pronounce—now I was Zandra. I befriended Polish kids, an Afghan girl, a Jehovah's Witness—the outsiders with messy identities like mine. Even while being around Germans was getting easier, being around other Bosnians was often challenging. To Germans I was a foreigner, an Ausländer, a Bosnierin. To Bosnians, I was a problematic category.

By then, I had already decided I wouldn't play the ethnicity game. When Bosnians asked, "What are you?" I'd stubbornly reply, "A human being, just like you." They could accept me or not—but I wouldn't be friends with anyone who needed me to be something I wasn't. Not belonging to one ethnicity or nation was the only thing I knew I was—and I was learning to be comfortable with it.

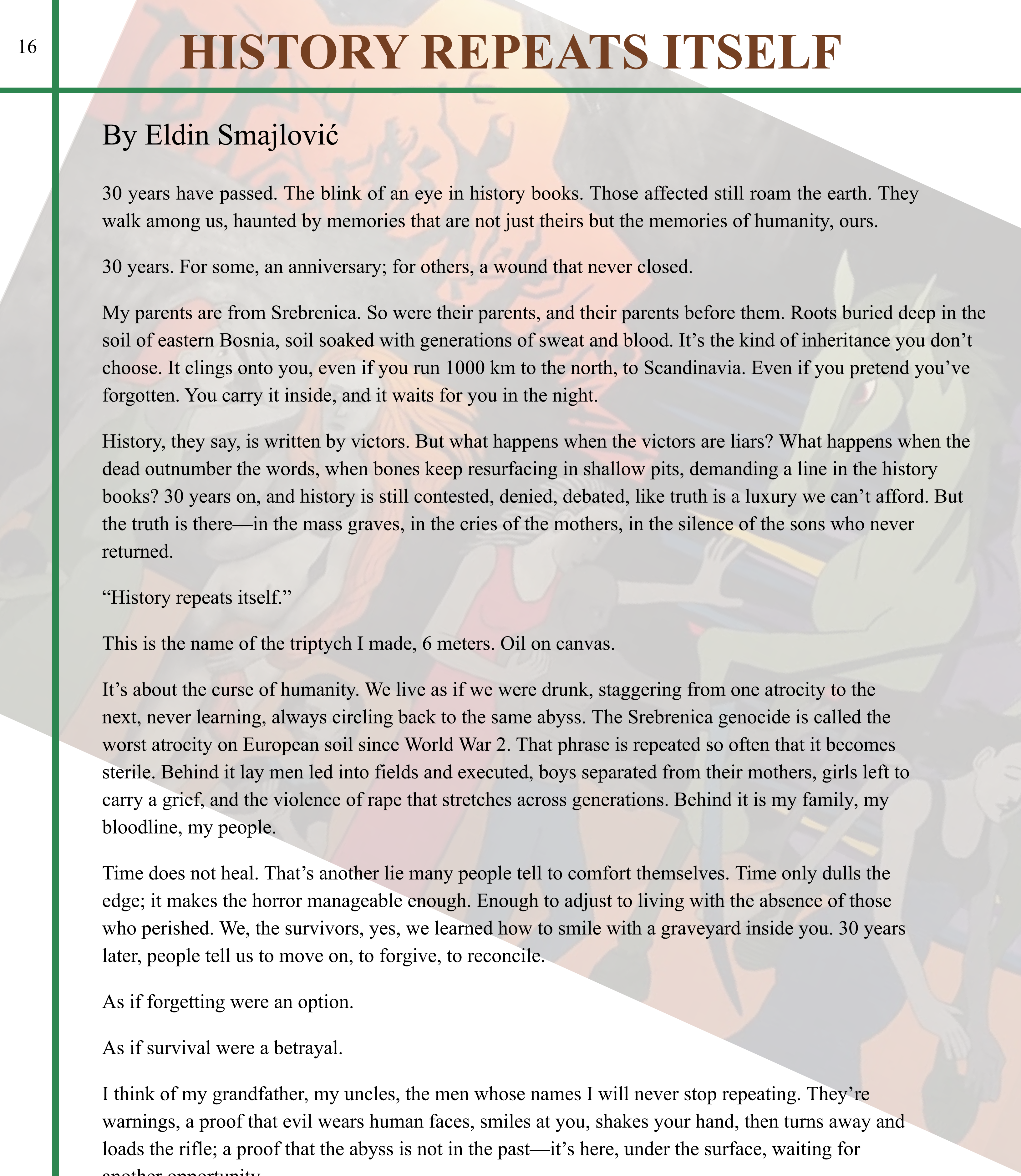
In 1998, we left Germany and became refugees again, this time in the United States. America felt huge, strange, depersonalized—but also liberating. Nobody knew me. Many people looked and sounded different from each other. People called me Sandra, Sondra, Sandy, and didn't care beyond that. I realize that my adjustment was easier than for many refugees—I was white, European, knew some English, and I was experienced at this game of being new. I jumped at the opportunity to get an education, and rushed ahead to get my bachelor's, master's, and then a PhD. All the while, I immersed myself in the social sciences, exploring questions of identity. I learned that my best way to resist nationalist and fascist mindsets was to reject the fiction of singular identities.

> **"Why should it matter that I was leaving if home no longer wanted me?"**

If I must choose an identity, I say I am Bosnian, born within Bosnia's borders, but I refuse ethnic labels. My mixedness never prevented me from understanding what happened during the Bosnian genocide. I openly criticize nationalism and choose to associate with kind, honest people of any ethnicity. Leaving home became the moment I realized that belonging was simply not worth it. If I belonged to a place, why was I forced to leave it? If I have to choose an ethnic background, do I choose my mom's or my dad's? Does doing so not mean choosing one parent over another? Why would I do that?

People often ask if I feel lost, not knowing "what I am." I don't. I am comfortable being many things. What unsettles me is when others try to box me in. I never wanted to be just a Bosniak or a Serb. I never wanted to choose a religion. I am not any one of these things, but rather a mosaic of them all. Maybe I am more Bosnian when I stay in Bosanski Novi, and maybe more American when I travel the world. Maybe I am more Bosniak among Serbs, and more Serb among Bosniaks. But I am most at ease in the messiness, in this dynamic relationship of belonging and identity.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF



By Eldin Smajlović

30 years have passed. The blink of an eye in history books. Those affected still roam the earth. They walk among us, haunted by memories that are not just theirs but the memories of humanity, ours.

30 years. For some, an anniversary; for others, a wound that never closed.

My parents are from Srebrenica. So were their parents, and their parents before them. Roots buried deep in the soil of eastern Bosnia, soil soaked with generations of sweat and blood. It's the kind of inheritance you don't choose. It clings onto you, even if you run 1000 km to the north, to Scandinavia. Even if you pretend you've forgotten. You carry it inside, and it waits for you in the night.

History, they say, is written by victors. But what happens when the victors are liars? What happens when the dead outnumber the words, when bones keep resurfacing in shallow pits, demanding a line in the history books? 30 years on, and history is still contested, denied, debated, like truth is a luxury we can't afford. But the truth is there—in the mass graves, in the cries of the mothers, in the silence of the sons who never returned.

"History repeats itself."

This is the name of the triptych I made, 6 meters. Oil on canvas.

It's about the curse of humanity. We live as if we were drunk, staggering from one atrocity to the next, never learning, always circling back to the same abyss. The Srebrenica genocide is called the worst atrocity on European soil since World War 2. That phrase is repeated so often that it becomes sterile. Behind it lay men led into fields and executed, boys separated from their mothers, girls left to carry a grief, and the violence of rape that stretches across generations. Behind it is my family, my bloodline, my people.

Time does not heal. That's another lie many people tell to comfort themselves. Time only dulls the edge; it makes the horror manageable enough. Enough to adjust to living with the absence of those who perished. We, the survivors, yes, we learned how to smile with a graveyard inside you. 30 years later, people tell us to move on, to forgive, to reconcile.

As if forgetting were an option.

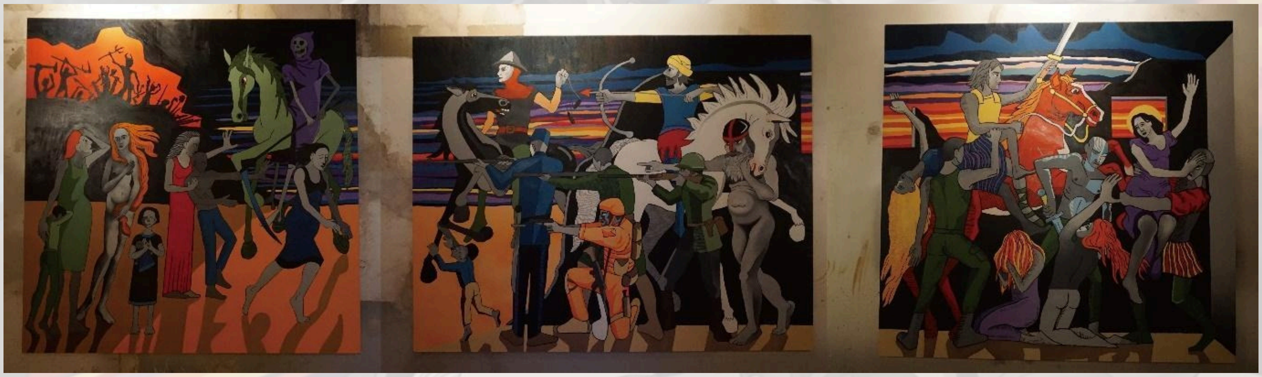
As if survival were a betrayal.

I think of my grandfather, my uncles, the men whose names I will never stop repeating. They're warnings, a proof that evil wears human faces, smiles at you, shakes your hand, then turns away and loads the rifle; a proof that the abyss is not in the past—it's here, under the surface, waiting for another opportunity.

Memory is both a weapon and a wound. I live in Northern Europe now, surrounded by people who know Srebrenica only as a word, a headline, a dusty entry in history. Sometimes I envy them. They can say “Srebrenica” and feel nothing. For me, it is a word that tears me apart. When I paint, I try to give form to that tearing. Silver is srebro in Bosnian. Srebrenica means Silver town. Silver town as a silver lining. Shapes, colours, shadows. Art is the only language that doesn’t betray us, any of us.

Words in this text are short. Sentences are too small for the graves they must explain.

This is the sickness of the human race. The arrogance to say “never again” after Auschwitz, then to yawn when genocide comes to Bosnia, to Rwanda, to Darfur. What is the point of memory if it fails us every generation? What is the point of art if it doesn’t burn through the complacency of those who look at it?



The dead move inside us, rearranging our insides, whispering in our ears. I don’t see their faces when I close my eyes. I can only hear their cries. They tell me to remember. They tell me to keep painting, to keep speaking, writing, to keep screaming into the void even when no one listens.

People ask me where I come from. I tell them: from Srebrenica. From ashes. From silence. From the black hole where the world looked away. And yet, I am here. The paradox of survival. I carry both shame and pride. Shame that I survived while others didn’t. Pride that my bloodline endured, that I’m still breathing, creating, speaking.

Survival itself as resistance.

30 years. For history, nothing. For us, an eternity.

Srebrenica is not over. It is not a chapter we can close. It lives on in every denial, every distortion, every time someone calls it “a tragedy” instead of naming it what it was: genocide. The word matters. Naming matters. To call it genocide is to honour the dead. To call it anything less is to kill them a second time.

I write this not for historians or politicians. I write this for the youth who inherit a world that already betrayed us. I write it because I want them to understand that history is not abstract. It breathes. It stalks. It waits for us to forget so it can return.

History indeed repeats itself.

Art demands repetition. History doesn’t.

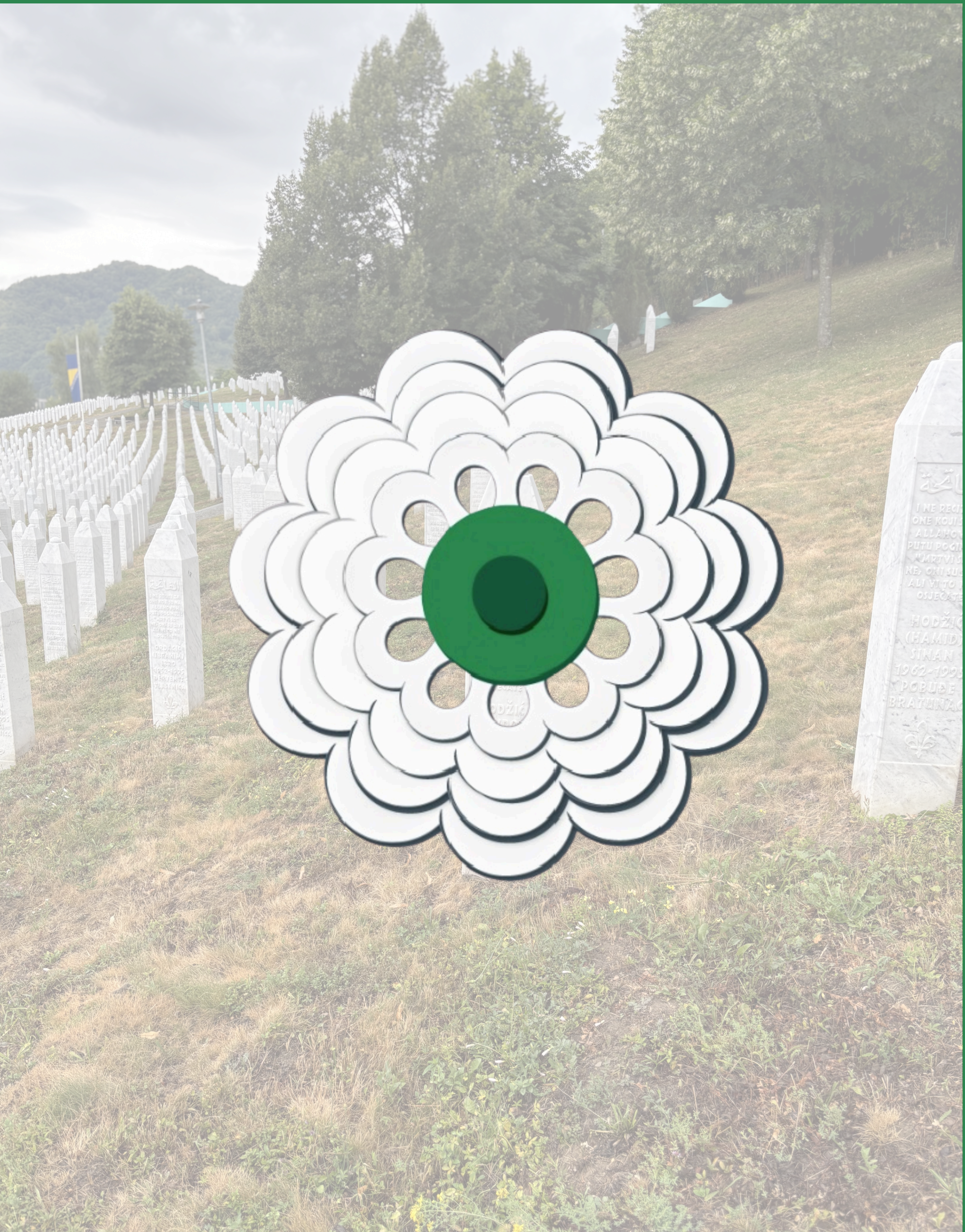
Memory demands repetition. Silence shouldn’t.

Existence after genocide is absurd. You build a life, laugh with friends, fall in love, and then a memory strikes you like a knife. You remember that your bloodline was nearly erased. You remember that graves still wait to be found. You remember that evil is not gone, just hidden. And you realize that your laughter is a kind of rebellion, a slap in the face of death.

30 years have passed. A blink of an eye. But the dead still roam the earth. They are here, with us, demanding to be remembered. If we fail them, we fail ourselves.

History repeats itself. It always does. We need to shout loudly enough, paint bravely, write honestly enough, and we can break the cycle. Art can be the wound that heals, the memory that warns, the voice that refuses to die.

“History, they say, is written by victors. But what happens when the victors are liars?”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HISTORY RHYMES ITSELF

By Eldin Smajlović

NOTE:

1. *In Bosnian, Bosnia is Bosna, named after the river that runs through it. Hercegovina is spelled with a "c," after the ruler with a German title—Herzog Stjepan Kosača. It is the identity of my country. I don't write America with a "k," nor my own name with a "c"—it is Smajlović. It is my identity.*
2. *The Republika Srpska is one of the two main political entities in Bosnia and Hercegovina, established by the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the Serbian aggression on Bosnia. It is mostly populated by ethnic Serbs and has its own government, legislature, police, and judiciary. While it officially forms half of Bosnia and Hercegovina, it operates with considerable autonomy and often pursues policies that reflect Serbian nationalist interests.*

They left their homes with smoke still in their hair and prayers still echoing in their ears. Bosnian Muslims—Bosniaks—live today across Western Europe and North America, scattered by war, rebuilding lives under foreign skies. Men in factories, women in hospitals, children learning new accents faster than their parents learned new languages. They carry two passports, two identities, two hearts that beat out of rhythm but in the same body.

Far more live in Turkey—between two and four million by official count, perhaps six when the generations are traced. Descendants of exiles from centuries past, all haunted by a shared memory that refuses to fade. Many still bear names that whisper Bosnia. They have blended into Turkish life, yet their identity endures, a stubborn seed of belonging has survived in them, resistant to time and borders.

In Bosnia itself, that seed is under siege once again. The entity called Republic of Serbs, or Republika Srpska, carved out through ethnic cleansing, still works tirelessly to limit dual citizenship for Bosniaks—especially with Turkey. It is a quiet war fought with legal clauses instead of guns. The reasoning is clear: if Bosniaks reconnect with Turkey, it threatens the fiction of a unified Bosnia under Serb dominance, and with Serbia. Their fear is old and familiar to all in Bosnia. To deny Bosniaks the right to dual citizenship is to deny their continuity. It is an attempt to fracture the invisible bridge between exiles and homeland, to ensure that displacement becomes permanent. And yet, even this strategy carries its own irony. If Bosniaks are stripped of belonging, they will be called Turks. The term Turks has been used as a derogatory label by Serbian nationalists as part of broader efforts to marginalize and exclude Bosniaks from Bosnia's political and social fabric.

History rhymes itself. Not in identical events, but in familiar shadows. The same ambitions, the same greed, the same silence of those who should have spoken. Bosnia has lived in that rhythm for more than a millennium. Since the 700s, when the first seeds of its name were whispered along the river Bosna, it has stood between worlds: East and West, empire and rebellion, faith and heresy. In between two Sees, Bosnia became a unique ground for the emergence of an independent church. Along with Cathars in France, Patarins in Italy, and Bogomils in Bulgaria, the Bosnian Church was one of a few apostate Churches in Europe at the time—predecessors of Protestantism. Both Hungarian kings (Roman Catholics) and Byzantine emperors (Orthodox) wanted to convert Bosnians and put the land under their influence. A small land with too much history for its size.

From the earliest days, its position was a curse and a privilege, a crossroads beautiful until armies decided to march through it. Empires came not just to conquer, but to reshape life. Byzantines claimed it, then Hungarians, then Ottomans, then Austro-Hungarians, and then came the forced unification of all South Slavs with Serbia, but under the name of Yugoslavia. Across history, however, a consistent pattern emerges: Serbian claims to Bosnia. From the Middle Ages to the rise of nationalism in the 1800s, all the way to Milošević and the present day. It left marks not only on the land, but on the Bosnian soul. A neighbour who saw Bosnia not as a country, but as a prize to absorb, something to deny, something to erase.

History in this part of the world is not written in years, but in centuries of persistence. Through slow, calculated moves, through education that denied Bosnians their history, through accusation of false religion, through denying the Bosnian language—absorbing it in Serbo-Croatian— through force, that dream became a doctrine, and that doctrine a weapon. The Serbian kingdom dreamed of "uniting" with what it could not tolerate: Slavs of a different religion (Bosniaks), stubbornly themselves.

It was not one invasion, but a rhythm of invasions. One century of swords, another of propaganda. One generation's silence becoming the next one's grave. Western powers took 49% of Bosnia in one night, in Dayton, Ohio and gave it Serb leadership. Srebrenica "went" to Serbs. The history rhymes: softly, gradually, until the rhyme becomes indistinguishable from fate.

There is a poem by Mehmedalija "Mak" Dizdar, a poet who was denied housing, work, and publication for defying the regime of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and their systematic efforts to erase Bosnia, its culture, and language. The suppression of Bosnia in socialist Yugoslavia was not always loud or uniform, but it was real, especially in the decades before the 1970s. For a long time, the state promoted a narrative that framed Bosnia not as a distinct cultural and historical entity, but as a kind of neutral administrative space shared by Serbs and Croats. Bosniaks themselves were officially categorized as either "Muslim Serbs," "Muslim Croats," or simply "undetermined," which erased their identity in practice even if not always in name. This ambiguity justified policies that restricted Bosniak cultural expression, Islamic heritage, and independent historical scholarship. Writers like "Mak" Dizdar, whose work centered on medieval Bosnian heritage, and the continuity of Bosnian identity, were seen as politically inconvenient because they challenged the regime's preferred narrative. His life's difficulties reflected a cultural policy that tolerated Bosnian identity only as long as it did not assert historical autonomy. His poem goes:

Once a certain questioner asked:
And who is that, what is that, oh do forgive me
Where is that
Where does it come from
Where is it going
Bosna
They say.

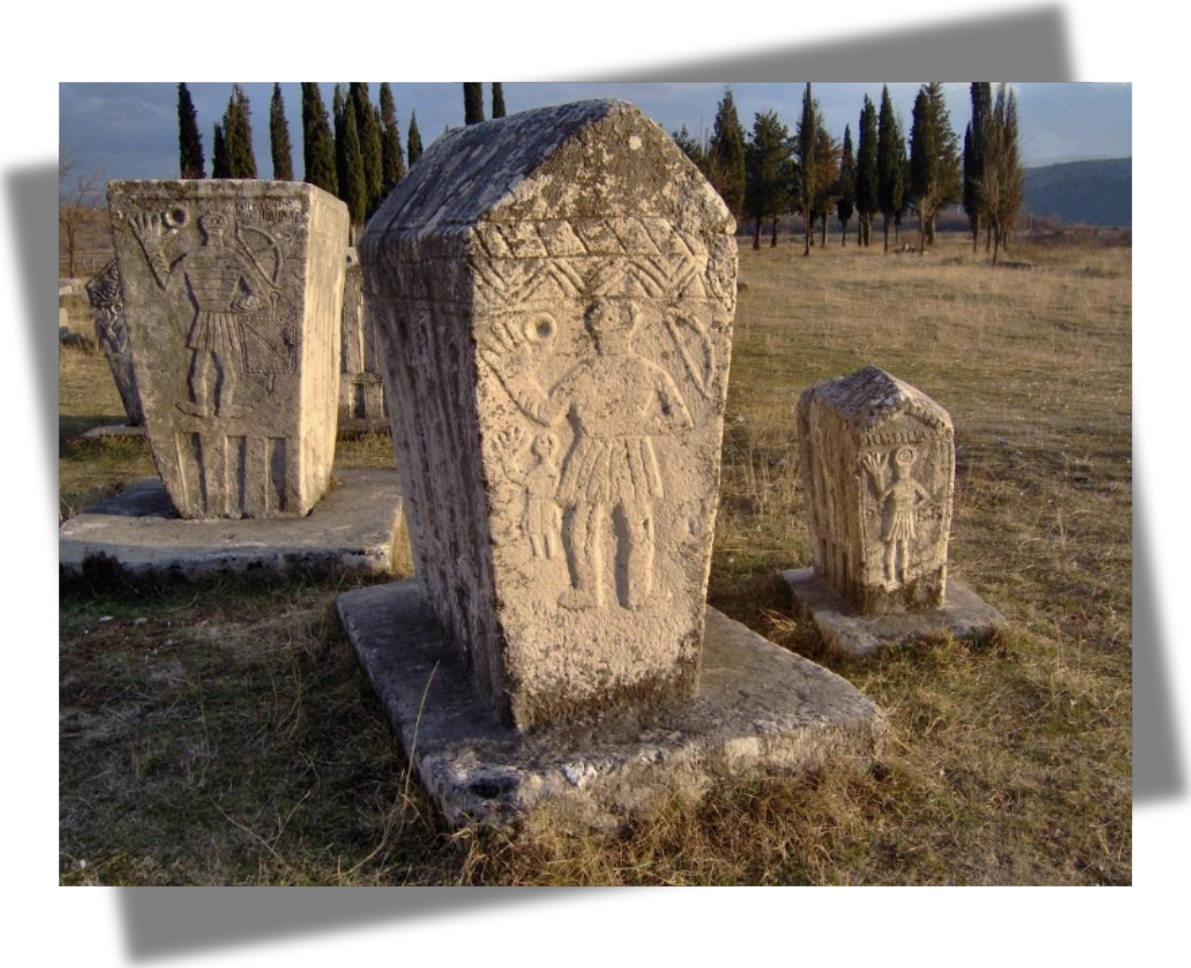
And the one asked got an urgent reply:
Bosna, oh do forgive me, a land
Both solemn
And bare, oh do forgive me
And cold and hungry
And moreover
Oh do forgive me
Defiant
Of
Dreams.

(The author's translation of very difficult and archaic Bosnian to English)

Bosnia's endurance is also a rhyme. A tragic one. Every attempt to erase it has only made it more visible. Every denial births another poem, another painting, another generation that remembers. It survives through stubbornness, through art, through the unyielding faith that beauty can exist even in ruins. To live in Bosnia, or to be from it, is to hear the rhyme beneath every headline. To sense that the past has not passed. To understand that what begins with words ends with graves, as on medieval tombs, if left unanswered.

History rhymes itself because humanity keeps singing the same song of greed, division, arrogance. But it can change. The rhyme can shift. It takes voices, brushes, and hearts that refuse the script.

The Bosnian fate: history repeats itself, history rhymes itself. But so does resilience. And as long as someone remembers, as long as someone paints or writes, the rhyme might still resolve into something new—not repetition, but revelation.



Stećak (p. stećci) is the name for monumental medieval tombstones that lie scattered across Bosnia and Hercegovina. It is a cultural heritage of the Bosnian Church, a medieval "heretic" religion according to Rome, a predecessor of Protestantism.

MOTHERS OF SREBRENICA

The Group of Eastern Bosnian Women Who Have Shaped Transitional Justice

By Velma Šarić

When their husbands, brothers, and sons were murdered in the July 1995 Srebrenica Genocide, few would have guessed that the Mothers of Srebrenica would go on to define the genocide's memorialization or transitional justice in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Yet that is exactly what this group of women from rural eastern Bosnia has achieved. The Mothers of Srebrenica have led the fight for transitional justice in the wake of the genocidal atrocities committed against predominantly Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) civilians during the Bosnian War. They have set the parameters of the conversation and have made international institutions enshrine a culture of memory and justice that is rooted in historical fact. In the aftermath of the United Nations' (UN) passing of the Srebrenica Resolution in May of 2024, it is incumbent on us to examine the Mothers' extraordinary legacy and contribution to transitional justice in the region.

The Mothers of Srebrenica is part of the umbrella organization of the Movement of the Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclaves Association. The Association brings together and coordinates the activities of the Mothers of Srebrenica, Women of Srebrenica, and the Women of Podrinje-Bratunac. The Association was founded in 1996, just one year after the de jure end of the Bosnian War.

Their objective was a simple yet mammoth task: to find out the truth behind what had happened to their husbands, brothers, and sons, who had been ripped from their arms by the Army of the Republika Srpska (VRS) in July 1995, under the supervision of UN Peacekeeping Forces (UNPROFOR), in the UN-declared "safe areas" of Srebrenica and Žepa. The Association soon expanded its scope to include the fate of all civilians in eastern Bosnia who went missing between 1992 and 1995. This includes missing persons from underrepresented towns such as Foča, in which Bosniak women were notoriously detained and raped en masse by Serb(ian) paramilitary forces.

How did this association of rural women set out to achieve their goals? An outsider would have pointed out that they were operating within a political climate hostile to memorialization and justice: the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords had formally recognized the Republika Srpska entity, for whose creation their loved ones were murdered. Though trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) were underway when the Association was founded, there had not been a single conviction. Within this hostile environment, the strategy developed by the Mothers was both holistic and effective.

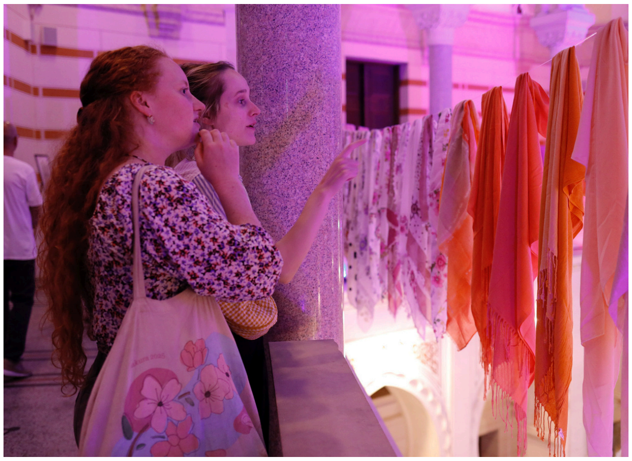
1996-2000: Important Gains

The first five years of the Association's operation were crucial. Within this period, the Mothers were able to secure victories that would safeguard the memorialization of the genocide from systemic revisionism.

In January 1996, the Mothers staged their first major protests in BiH. They demanded that the International Red Cross provide them with information on the fate of the men who had remained in Srebrenica after units under the command of Ratko Mladić seized the town. They carried out a second protest in 1997 in front of several international institutions, voicing the same unequivocal demand: "We want the truth!"

These protests catalyzed the inception of the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) in BiH. Without the ICMP, the rigorous and systematic investigation into missing people in BiH and all areas affected by the 1990s Yugoslav Wars would not have been possible. The ICMP has ensured that mass graves, including those in which the victims of the Srebrenica Genocide were buried, have been excavated in line with the best forensic standards and accurately identified based on DNA analysis. To achieve this, the ICMP adopted a new method of DNA identification that revolutionized forensic investigations in post-conflict spaces. This new method was adopted precisely because of the perpetrators' brutal attempt to cover up crimes by moving the bodies of victims from primary to secondary and later tertiary mass graves. The results are overwhelmingly clear: to date, more than 70% of the 40,000 missing persons in BiH have been identified. This includes over 7,000 of the 8,372 known victims of the genocide in Srebrenica.

Kada Hotić, who is the Vice President of the Mothers of Srebrenica, was one of a group of representatives who visited the DNA laboratory at The Hague. “The ICMP is the greatest gift we could have had,” Hotić concluded. Indeed, this is true. It was a gift to the people of Bosnia that was first made possible by the Mothers of Srebrenica.



The Mothers could have easily stopped there. Instead, they furthered their initial victory through deeper collaboration with the ICTY and the ICMP. In 1998, the Mothers created a database of missing people based on interviews with the genocide survivors and the victims’ relatives. They then presented this database to The Hague. Such testimonial evidence proved crucial in the bitterly fought trials against the accused perpetrators of atrocities that, in most cases, ended in conviction.

There was one other key early battle that the Mothers fought. Given that Potočari, the site of Europe’s first genocide since the Holocaust, now found itself in Republika Srpska (RS) territory, the risk of RS authorities diminishing of the physical site of genocide in the future was palpable.

For this reason, the president of the Association, Munira Subašić, coordinated with other mothers’ associations to demand that the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in BiH grant Potočari a special status. In 2000, the then High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, took heed of the Mothers’ demands and declared that the land in Potočari would be turned into a memorial and cemetery for the victims of the genocide. This crucial victory of the Mothers of Srebrenica has protected this site of genocide from the revisionism that we see in other sites of atrocity across the RS entity. Today, the Srebrenica Memorial Center has become an internationally recognized institution that spearheads the documentation and memorialization of the Srebrenica Genocide. The words of the Mothers’ VP, Kada Hotić, ring truer now more than ever: “Imagine if the memorial wasn’t in Srebrenica. It would have given an argument to the deniers. History starts to be written the moment it happens, and we knew that it was important for the memorial to be placed where these things happened.”

Click to Listen: The Story of Rejha Ademović

2001-Present Day: Shaping Transitional Justice in BiH

It is abundantly clear that, in its early years, the Mothers of Srebrenica helped define the parameters of the institutionalized investigation and memorialization of the war's atrocities.

Within these parameters, much has been achieved. The ICMP went on to help BiH authorities establish the Missing Persons Institute (MPI) on 30 August 2005, the International Day of the Disappeared. The ICMP then assisted the MPI in creating a Central Record of all missing persons in BiH, alongside a centralized database of all non-identified cases in mortuaries.

Moreover, the Mothers of Srebrenica played a fundamental role in the ICTY trials, as well as the trials held in the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through their intimate testimonies, the members of the Association have made a historic contribution to the convictions of those responsible for genocide and war crimes in eastern Bosnia. Justice on this scale would not have been possible without their testimonial evidence and perseverance.

30 years after the Bosnian War, they have continued their struggle to bring those responsible for genocide and other crimes to justice. The Mothers continuously advocated for the adoption of the Law on the Prohibition of Denial of Genocide and Other Crimes Committed in BiH, which was eventually brought into effect by the OHR in July 2021. Today, they fight for the implementation of this crucial law.

Survivor Rejha Ademović, holding donated shoes that belonged to a murdered loved one.

The Mothers have never relented in terms of their double-pronged approach, which sees them leading the fight for transitional justice both at home and in the international arena. At the Association's request, which was delivered to Brussels personally by its members, the European Parliament adopted the Resolution on Srebrenica in 2005. The resolution openly condemned the glorification of the war criminals behind the Srebrenica Genocide, stating in Paragraph 3 that it "considers the apparent popular support enjoyed by Karadžić and Mladić in some parts of the region to be an insult to the memory of the victims and a major obstacle to reconciliation."

Meanwhile, the Association never forgot that it was Dutch UNPROFOR soldiers who had overseen the handing over of their children to Serb forces in July 1995. In June 2007, the Mothers filed a 300-page lawsuit against the government of the Netherlands. The Hague District Court found that the Dutch government was partially liable for the deportation (and subsequent murder) of approximately 350 Bosniaks in Potočari at the UN base in July 1995.

Most recently, representatives from the Mothers of Srebrenica travelled with a delegation of Bosniak survivors and officials to the UN General Assembly, in order to testify during the Assembly's discussion of its proposed Srebrenica resolution. Once again, the Mothers' testimonies reminded international institutions of the need to enshrine the memorialization of the genocide with steadfast commitment. The resolution to mark 11 July as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the Srebrenica Genocide was passed on May 23rd 2024, with 84 votes in favor.

Given their nearly 30 years of struggle and the tangible results it has produced, it is unquestionable that the labor of the Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Association has borne fruit. That these feats have been pulled off by a group of civilians who have had no personal or professional leverage in the judicial and political institutions they have sought to change makes their legacy even more remarkable. Against all odds, in the most hostile of political climates, a group of Bosniak women from rural eastern Bosnia has changed transitional justice forever.

SREBRENICA, THEN AND NOW:

A Journey Through Unfinished History

By Dr. Hikmet Karčić

I was a teenager in high school the first time I visited Srebrenica. The year was 2003 or 2004, less than a decade after the genocide, and though I had read about the events and seen reports on television, nothing could have prepared me for the feeling of actually being there. Srebrenica was not yet the place of solemn memorials and polished ceremonies that it would later become. It was still raw. This was one of the first organized high-school trips to Srebrenica from Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital. Our high school was the only one there.

What struck me most immediately was how fresh everything felt. Time had not yet settled into the landscape. Houses stood in ruins, their walls still standing but without windows or roofs. Nature had begun to creep back into some of them. The silence felt unnatural.

The most vivid memory I carry is walking into the old battery factory in Potočari. This was the site where thousands of Bosniak men and boys sought protection under the supposed safety of the United Nations in July 1995, only to be handed over to their killers. By 2003, the factory had already been privatized. It was still a working space in some ways, or at least it bore the marks of industry. I remember stepping inside and being surprised at how ordinary it looked at first. The walls were stained, machinery was scattered throughout, and in one hall, machines for wood cutting and timber still stood.

The factory property had just been declared the Srebrenica Memorial Center by the then–High Representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Paddy Ashdown. The Memorial Center was only beginning to take shape. It existed in name more than in form; it was not yet fully functioning. Its presence was more a vision than a reality—a plan for what would one day become a sacred site of mourning and education. In 2004, it was modest, almost fragile, as though the very idea of formally acknowledging the genocide was still controversial. Even international organizations and embassies hesitated to use the proper terminology.

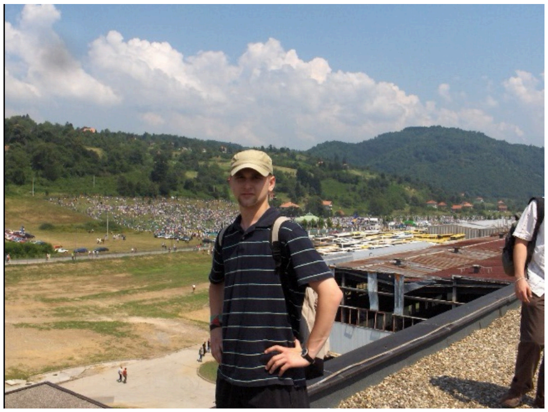

An early photo of Hikmet, from 2005-2006, showing the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center before it was officially built.

Photo credit: Semir Zilić

One moment from that day stands out in particular. A curator arrived with a laptop and an overhead projector—equipment that looked more suited for a school classroom than a memorial site. He set it up right there in one of the factory rooms, the machinery still looming in the background, and played a short film for us.

At the time, I did not fully realize what I was watching, but later I would recognize parts of it as belonging to the renowned BBC documentary A Cry from the Grave by Leslie Woodhead. The footage projected onto the factory wall showed countless scenes from Srebrenica: columns of refugees, desperate faces, UN vehicles, the column of men, execution sites, and mass graves. Sitting there as a teenager, on the cold concrete floor, my peers and I all felt defeated and angry.

Photo credit: Semir Zilić

A more recent photo of Hikmet from the Sandici football field, showing individuals gathered to remember the Srebrenica Genocide.

Srebrenica in 2004 was not universally recognized as it is today. Many denied or minimized what had happened. The very idea of establishing a memorial was not entirely supported by everyone—locally or internationally. But for me, the visit became a formative moment. To be in Srebrenica at that time was to confront, in the most immediate way, what it means for history to be unfinished. It was not something I had read in a textbook or learned in a classroom.

Looking back now, I realize that my visit in 2004 placed me at a turning point in the way Srebrenica would be remembered. At the time, the memorial was just beginning; today, it has become a central site of commemoration, recognized around the world. It had to be fought for, established, and nurtured—especially in the face of denial. Twenty years on, the Srebrenica Memorial Center stands as a respected institution, with a fully functioning structure and mission.

That early visit continues to shape my work today. In my collaboration with the Srebrenica Memorial Center, I carry with me the memory of what it once was—an unfinished idea, a fragile space that is still finding its voice. This perspective reminds me how vital it is to build a bridge between the survivors who lived through the events and the new generation who carry the responsibility of remembrance. Their connection ensures that the memory of Srebrenica remains alive, not only through facts and exhibits, but through empathy and understanding.

As a teenager, I did not yet know what role memory and history would play in my life, but I knew that I had seen something profoundly important.

DR. HASAN NUHANOVIĆ

Interviewers: Sarah Snyder & Bekir Hodžić

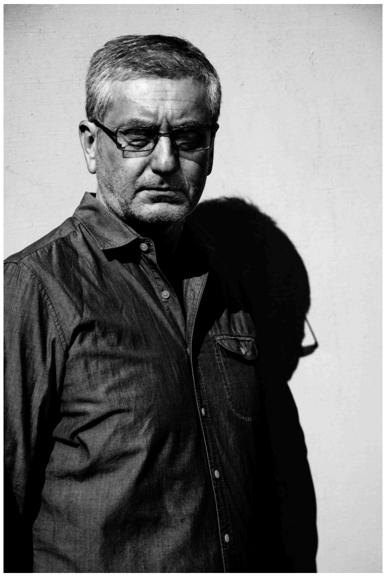


Photo credit: Febe Meijnen

Hasan Nuhanović (b. 1968) is a globally acknowledged advocate for truth, justice, and recognition for victims of the Bosnian genocide. A survivor of the Srebrenica genocide, he served as a interpreter for United Nations peacekeepers in the safe zone. After the town fell to Bosnian-Serb forces, he managed to escape, but not without his entire immediate family—mother, father, and brother—being handed over to those forces by U.N. soldiers. They were all later killed in the genocide.

Since surviving, Hasan has dedicated himself to various advocacy efforts centered on the genocide: these include founding the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center, providing evidence before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and successfully suing the Dutch government for their negligence in Srebrenica. He has written several books on his experiences, makes regular International media appearances to discuss the Bosnian genocide, and recently completed his PhD at RMIT University.

For this issue of the Humanist, we wished to speak with Hasan due to both his incredible life story and the essential work he has done—and continues to do—for Bosnian genocide awareness. In the interview below, we engage with him on questions of memory, justice, and reconciliation vis-á-vis Bosnia, and particularly Srebrenica, and he provides critical insights into the current socio-political landscape facing Bosnian genocide remembrance work. We have edited the interview for clarity and length, but a full-length audio recording of our conversation can be found embedded in the online version of this issue.

Click to Listen: Full interview audio, unedited

Sarah and Bekir: Building on that, could you talk a little bit about the advocacy work you've engaged in across the past three decades on these issues in Bosnia?

Hasan: I see myself as having the role of someone who speaks on behalf of other people who are unable to speak. This started during the war. I was one of very few individuals in Srebrenica—after it became a designated UN Safe Area—who spoke English, alongside a few others, and so I became a translator for the United Nations there. It was, in a way, a role where I was trying to tell the rest of the world what was happening to us.

And unfortunately, I continued to play that sort of role after the fall of Srebrenica. My parents and my brother were missing, presumably dead, as were thousands of other people whose bodies have been buried in mass graves after being executed by Serb forces. I realized that there was absolutely no other choice but to speak about this, and not only in my own name, but also working with organizations like the Mothers of Srebrenica and other related survivors' associations. Now, these groups were mostly women, women who had lost their sons, husbands, brothers, and fathers. And the group was quite small, but we still organized to demand help, assistance, and understanding from local authorities and international organizations. We had to speak for ourselves. No one else was going to do it for us.

It was a continuous process—events happened one after another, and because it was so difficult to get the information about the missing and the need to do so was so pressing, we never stopped. At the beginning, we named our public campaign the “Campaign for Truth and Justice.” Those key words, truth and justice, have never changed.

You gesture toward the ongoing nature of this work. Given that constant engagement, what motivates you to continue doing this work?

You have to always look at commemoration and memory from several different perspectives. Speaking of the survivors themselves, it felt like it was not a matter of choice when it came to doing this work, because so many problems piled up for us and over time these problems become even more pronounced. When I say that, I mean, for example, local and international efforts to locate the mass graves and exhume the dead bodies. At one point, we were invited to Tuzla, at this improvised morgue, and we were told there were 2,000 body bags there. The remains were all mixed up. We did not know the identity of the victims. So we, the survivors, had to campaign for the use of DNA technology to identify these individuals, and it was through our advocacy that, a few years after the process started, officials identified the first Srebrenica victim by DNA matching.

And we were also never prepared to accept injustice and let it be swept under the carpet. The Netherlands, for example, feels guilty, of course, about what happened. But they would not have felt guilty had we not, including myself, I would say primarily in this case, informed the global audience and the audience in the Netherlands itself about the role of the Dutch troops and servicemen in Srebrenica. So, for example, my family was handed over in front of my eyes, handed over to the Serbs, by Dutch U.N. forces. The United Nations even tried to obscure this involvement—in their first report in 1999 on Srebrenica, there's like two paragraphs in which they mentioned the refugees at Potočari—and I thus had to speak, because there was a silence whereby we did not want silence. We wanted to break the silence. We wanted the world to recognize the facts regarding Srebrenica. And this was not happening. One of the messages we were getting told was that we should look to the future, we should reconcile. What does that mean? Of course, I'm looking to the future, but does that mean that I should forget the role of the United Nations? The story of the Srebrenica genocide is not a story of two sides. We have the perpetrators and the victims, but we also have a third side: bystanders. These forces were standing there on the ground as the refugees were being thrown out of the U.N. compound and separated. These sorts of things needed to be talked and written about.

And with that, can you explain why commemoration and memory is so important for Bosnia as well?

Now, in terms of commemoration and memory, I want to remind people that the main difference between a commemoration and a memorialization is that a commemoration is basically an event. It could be a series of events, but they all take place within a certain time period, you know, maybe a day or two. And the Srebrenica commemoration, most of the time, happens on July 11. Countries in the world participate in the commemoration. It is meant to remember the victims and remind the world about what happened. But memorialization is a process. It is not an event. And you cannot really identify the beginning of it. When it comes to the Srebrenica genocide, I don't think we can identify the beginning of memorialization as a process. It is happening right now, as we speak, and it's happening all the time throughout the year.

Photo credit: Febe Meijnen

So, for example, what the Srebrenica Memorial is doing is a memorialization. It's an institution whose role is to memorialize the genocide by providing or offering the content, the narrative, the content—the stories about the victims and what happened to them—to the visitors who visit the memorial. That's one way to do it. Another way is that you, as a memorial, offer yourself to those who, for some reason, never decide to visit the site. So you try to reach out to them through other means, and in today's world, that normally happens through the Internet and various multimedia content. One physical part of the memorialization is the burial of the victims' remains. The families of the victims are present at the site when a burial takes place, and afterward, they—and this is what the Mothers of Srebrenica and others have worked to for the last three decades—gain a place where they can visit and spend some time on their own, a place to mourn. They get a white tombstone, which they can touch. They can touch the victims’ names on the memorial wall because they are etched in stone. And they can do so after the perpetrators had attempted to erase the victims from existence, not just by killing them, but also by trying to destroy their bodies forever.

Now, you touched upon the burials that are happening as a means of commemoration and memorialization, so what are some of the challenges in doing remembrance work today in Bosnia? And how is the war and genocide taught in schools for students, if at all?

The education system in Bosnia is divided into at least, I think, three different programs. There's a program for Bosniaks, there's one for Croats and there's one for the Serbs. And so you would find in these textbooks three different versions of history. At least, that is what I know at a surface level. More recently, it has been discussed, for example, how in a textbook for the pupils of the primary schools in the Republica Srpska, Radovan Karadžić is described as a hero. It is mentioned that he has been put on trial and convicted in the Hague, but he's portrayed as a hero. This is basically in line with the official denialist discourse of the official authorities of the Republica Srpska. This is an official position. The National Assembly of the Republica Srpska—its governing body—propagates an official narrative that what happened in Srebrenica was not a genocide. And denial extends beyond this legal classification to the genocide’s facts. The numbers of the victims have been denied and other historical facts, which had already been confirmed by a number of judgments delivered by the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia.

You take a few pages of these judgments and make them more accessible and students would have access to the truth. But this has not been done. And so, in my opinion, if we cannot find a consensus on one single version of history in this country, the minimum that is required is that all of the former warring factions, so-called warring factions, agree to the judgments of the ICTY This is the minimum. And that includes not only war criminals of the Serb ethnicity, but there were several individuals who were also indicted and convicted for war crimes committed against the Serb civilians and Croat civilians. So what I'm saying is that the minimum we should all accept as a common history the facts defined within these verdicts. And it hasn't been done.

Something you've mentioned in your prior engagements and writings is the difficulty of achieving justice in genocide's aftermath. So how do you view justice within the Bosnian context and what work, if any, exists or remains to be done to ensure justice—if even possible —or all those impacted by the genocide?

You know, this is definitely one of the most difficult questions you can ask of me or anybody else. So to start I'll give you some numbers. 168 individuals were indicted by the ICTY. 90 of them were convicted, so the others were acquitted. Over 90% of the indicted and of the convicted are of the Serb ethnicity. Over 90% of the crimes committed were against the victims of the Bosniak ethnicity. That is the international justice from the Hague. Then there was this other judgment, where Bosnia had launched a case against Serbia, and the case came to a conclusion in 2007 with a decision of the International Court of Justice. According to this judgment, what happened in July 1995 was a genocide, and the judgment does say that Serbia did not directly participate in this genocide. But according to the judgment, Serbia is responsible for not preventing or failing to prevent the genocide, and for not punishing those who were involved in the genocide. Serbia lost the case, as it was found in breach of the 1948 UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

But then how is justice being conducted in Bosnia? It took a long time before Bosnian authorities could build institutions that could enforce the law, but for the last 20 years or so, there are several law enforcement agencies that are capable of investigating war crimes in the country against war crime suspects of all ethnicities. And this is happening. Now, whether families and survivors are satisfied with the speed at which this is happening is another question. Of course, they are not. They are very, very disappointed. And the number of cases so far that have been investigated, and the number of war crime suspects that have been arrested and tried by state courts, have been far lower than what the survivors believe is the true number of the war crime suspects who still live in the country. And in the meantime, what has occurred is that some of these war crime suspects have died. Some of the survivors have died. They cannot testify anymore. But these kinds of investigations should never stop. A state should never close a chapter like this so that even when there are no more living survivors, the state continues to pursue these war crime cases as a civilizational value. It's a cliché, but justice delayed is justice denied. Justice really needs to come fast after a trial, because if you arrest a war criminal 30 years after the crime happened, this individual has already lived for 30 years with impunity.

Oftentimes, especially publicly, the survivors of genocide and other mass violences are expected to present themselves in a manner based on forgiveness, of remembering atrocity but letting go of one's anger toward perpetrators and reconciling with them. How have you seen that expectation, if at all, develop around survivors from Bosnia?

I would always replace the word reconciliation with another term. The other term is "facing the past." Reconciliation as such may be one part of that process of facing the past, but facing the past is something that has to happen if we are to even think about things like reconciliation. And you mentioned forgiveness and forgetting. And, I mean, nobody can be expected to forget because it's impossible to forget and no one is going to forget. When it comes to forgiveness, if you have two sides, one is supposed to forgive the other side, right? But who makes the first move? It should be the other side that makes the first move by asking for forgiveness. And I have not seen any requests of that sort coming to the survivors to forgive.

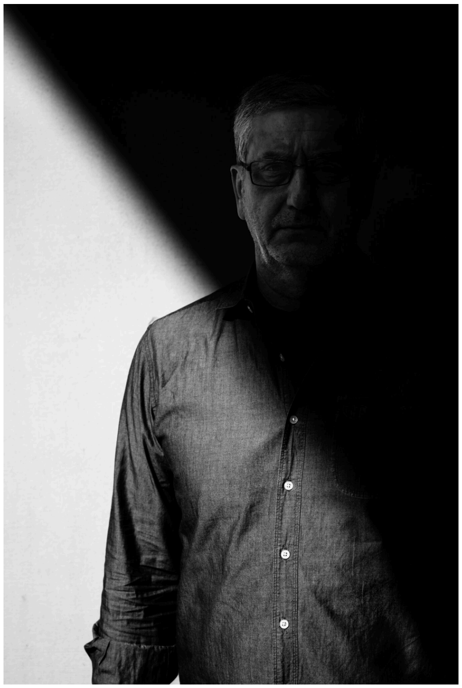


Photo credit: Febe Meijnen

And now if you look at the official position of Belgrade and Banja Luka, the two centers of the official Serb political sphere, the formal position is that a genocide did not happen. So what are we supposed to forgive? How can we forgive a genocide that did not happen according to their position? There are all these processes and forces working with one another or one against another. And for the last 30 years there has been no mass violence in Bosnia. But does that mean we live in peace? And does that mean that reconciliation has taken place? Or does it only mean that this violence is not happening because we have been separated into more or less three homogenous ethnic territories where mixing doesn't happen, or happens in a very limited sense?

Excellent point. And for a final question, thinking about that legacy, what role do you think the memory and understanding of the Bosnian genocide should play or has played in shaping how we view and address new atrocities?

I think it is important to push those who have the means to intervene to do so, just like during the Bosnian genocide. The Bosnian genocide could have been prevented in 1992 or stopped if the big powers did not wait for three and a half years before they intervened. The United States only became involved in the Bosnian war in 1995. By that time, tens of thousands of people had been massacred in this country. Beyond condemning ongoing atrocities, those with the means to intervene are the ones who should be asked what else can we do.

And just to finish, not every mass atrocity needs to be or will be characterized as a genocide. There are criteria, and what fits the term is decided by courts. But every mass suffering of people deserves to be looked at. Not every case of mass suffering should be referred to as a genocide for the world to react. The world needs to react to smaller cases of human suffering to prevent bigger cases of human suffering. Because by the time the world decides to react, it's too late. People have already been killed. And that's what happened in Bosnia.

That is such a profound and critical way to end this conversation. It took over 8,000 men and boys to be slaughtered in Srebrenica for intervention to occur, and if we are waiting for other Srebrenicas to happen before we try to prevent anything else in the world, then we're paving our path to the future in blood. And as you say, that's not the path we have to go down. Thank you Hasan, for speaking with us, and for contributing to this issue.

> **"The world needs to react to smaller cases of human suffering to prevent bigger cases of human suffering. Because by the time the world decides to react, it's too late. People have already been killed. And that's what happened in Bosnia."**

EDUCATING THROUGH MEMORY

Students and Survivors Build a Human Rights Archive

By Catherine Masud

"For the dead and the living, we must bear witness. For not only are we responsible for the memories of the dead, we are also responsible for what we are doing with those memories."
– Elie Wiesel

A Classroom Rooted in Memory

When I first began teaching film and human rights at the University of Connecticut (UConn), I was struck by how powerfully students responded when stories of injustice were not just told to them, but with them. Over time, I came to believe that the most transformative learning happens when students are invited to participate in the process of preserving lived history—to sit with survivors, to listen, to document, and to help carry those stories forward.

The Bosnian Community Oral History and Digital Archiving Project was born from that conviction. For the past three years, we have been working with the Bosniak Community in Connecticut to document and preserve their stories, covering not only their experience of the War and Genocide, but also their lives before and after the war, including their new lives in the United States. This project emerged from my dual interests in visual storytelling and community archives—two practices that, when intertwined, have the power to transform how we understand both history and humanity.

Origins in Storytelling and Archives

Before working with Connecticut's Bosniak community, I had collaborated with the local Armenian community, developing courses that brought students and community members together to record oral histories of survival, displacement, and identity under the banner of the Armenian Memory Project. This experience laid the groundwork for a teaching model that blends archival practice and oral history to engage students directly in human rights work.

Students learned that archives are not static repositories but living records of experience. Each semester, they created interview prompts, collaborated with participants to choose the stories they wanted to share, and encouraged them to bring personal artifacts—photos, letters, heirlooms, even fragments of daily life—that spoke to their histories. These objects and memories later became part of films, visual essays, and digital exhibits that reached audiences far beyond the classroom.

Left to right: UConn students Diego Reyes and Andre Johnson with Bosniak community member Dzenana Delić and community liaison Aida Gradescević at a recent oral history session

My approach draws inspiration from both the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, which centers survivor agency in testimony, and the University of Nebraska's History Harvest, which treats community members as co-archivists in preserving local history. The aim is to create a "living archive" of community memory that is not simply about the past—it is about shaping how future generations will remember.

A New Partnership: The Bosnian Community in Hartford

In the fall of 2023, the focus of my Human Rights Archives I & II class shifted from Armenian to Bosnian stories, marking the beginning of a deeply meaningful collaboration with the Bosniak community in Hartford, Connecticut. The project began thanks to one of my students, Aida Gradaščević, a Bosniak-American completing her Master's degree in Human Rights at UConn. Aida was born in Bijeljina, a city deeply affected by the Bosnian war. Her insight and access to the community became the bridge that made this next phase possible. Here she shares her reflections on what the experience of the project has meant for her.

Through these relationships, we also learned about the community's inspiring advocacy work—including their successful campaign to have July 11th declared Bosnian Genocide Remembrance Day by the Connecticut General Assembly. Many of the individuals who testified at the Capitol in favor of that initiative later participated in our oral history sessions, sharing not only their trauma but also their courage and resilience.

Students interviewing Muzafer Mujić, a member of the Hartford Bosniak community, during a class session at UConn.

Inside the Classroom: Learning to Listen

Each semester begins not with a camera, but with a conversation about ethics and empathy. I remind students that the heart of this project is not to "collect" stories, but to build relationships.

Students learn to reach out to community members with sensitivity, to ask questions that invite reflection rather than retraumatization, and to understand silence as part of testimony. They also study how visual storytelling—the play of light, gesture, and image—can express what words cannot.

From these interviews, students create short interpretive films that weave together oral histories, archival material, and personal mementos contributed by participants. These works serve both as educational tools for genocide awareness and as living records for families and future generations. One such film is Erasing Bosnia, which won an Award of Excellence at the 2024 BEA Festival of Media Arts.

A student reviews archival material brought by community member Halid Dervisević

What Students Learn

For students, the experience often redefines what "education" means. When students sit across from a survivor, history ceases to be distant. It becomes immediate and deeply personal. One student participant reflected afterward:

"I have learned that family and community archives are not only repositories of documents but also of personal stories and memories. They preserve the collective memory of a people. Visual storytelling allows us to create a more empathetic understanding of history, highlighting the human experiences behind the events."

Another wrote about the sensory depth of the process—something no textbook could capture:

"It was such a gift to walk with the survivors, to hear their powerful stories, and to share Bosnian food during the sessions. I felt that I was able to experience the culture with all five senses — seeing their garments, touching the artifacts, hearing their voices, tasting mint tea and homemade bread. I will not soon forget those moments."

A Community of Witnesses

For me, the most moving aspect of this project has been witnessing how students and survivors co-create meaning. The survivors, many of whom lost loved ones or endured unimaginable trauma, have shown immense courage and generosity in revisiting painful memories for the sake of educating others.

They have welcomed us into the stories of their lives with warmth and trust. Their stories — of exile and rebuilding, of grief and perseverance—are not simply accounts of tragedy, but of what it means to live after loss.

Left to Right: UConn student Christian Romero with Bekir Hodžić and Bekir's father Jakub Hodžić

"Today I'm a father of three young boys… I try to be as close with them as I can. I have very few items to show them about their grandparents—only a picture. Every trip to Bosnia is a trip to see their graves. My goal is for them to understand what happened, to preserve their identity, and to be forgiving rather than build revenge."

- Halid Dervišević

The students, in turn, bring openness, humility, and creativity. Many are encountering genocide testimony for the first time. Through their films, they learn that a camera is not just a recording device but a means of witnessing—a bridge between generations, cultures, and histories. In this way, storytelling becomes not only an act of remembrance—it is an act of justice. For Community members also, the act of speaking becomes an act of justice, of truth-telling as resistance, and a way of passing on their stories to future generations:

"If we, who survived, if we don't speak the truth, it won't be told. And some other people will tell lies. So we want to preserve that. We need to speak....Thank God I'm here to tell you these stories for our younger generations to know the truth of what happened."

- Dzenana Delić

Dzenana Delić shares her story with students during the UConn oral history sessions.

Looking Forward: Sustaining the Archive

As the project grows, so too does our vision for its future. We are now developing a digital archive to house the oral histories, artifacts, and student films—a living repository that will continue to evolve as more stories are added.

The archive will serve multiple audiences: as a community resource for Bosniak families in Connecticut and beyond; as an educational tool for teachers and students studying genocide and memory; and as a testament to how collaboration between universities and survivor communities can preserve history in meaningful ways.

Our engagement with the Bosniak community has also continued to strengthen and grow. In September of 2025 we were invited by community leaders to hold a special screening of student films at the Bosnian-American Cultural Center in Hartford, CT. At the event, community members spoke of the importance of passing on community memory to the next generation of Bosniak-Americans, and the role that the archive and the student-produced films could play as resources for community-based educational activities.

Students and community members gather at the Bosnian-American Cultural Center in Hartford on Sept. 20th, 2025 for a screening of student films

Beyond building educational outreach and archival infrastructure, my hope is to deepen the personal and ethical dimensions of this work. “Education through memory,” as I see it, is not just about learning from the past—it is about transforming how we engage with the present. When students sit across from a survivor, history becomes personal, immediate, and alive.

A Shared Future

The Bosnian Community Oral History and Digital Archiving Project is, at its heart, a collaboration of hope—between generations, between survivors and students, between memory and imagination. When communities see their histories treated with care by a new generation, they gain a sense of hope—that remembrance can be a form of resistance.

In an age when disinformation and denial threaten historical truth, these first-person accounts remind us that remembrance itself is a moral act. By preserving these voices, students are not only learning to make films—they are learning to bear witness.

And that, to me, is the ultimate purpose of education: to listen deeply, to see clearly, and to ensure that the lessons of the past continue to illuminate the path forward.

* * *

AN APPEAL FOR JUSTICE

The Urgent Need to Support the Right to Memorialization and to Prevent the Glorification of War Criminals

By Dr. David Pettigrew

5.8.1992.G. IZ LOGORA BARUTNI MAGACIN,
SRPSKI RATNI ZLOČINCI SU NA OVO MJESTO DOVEZLI,
STRIJELJANJEM LIŠILI ŽIVOTA I POTOM SPALILI
24 NEDUŽNA BOŠNJAKA SA PODRUČJA OPĆINA
KALINOVIK I TRNOVO.
ČOVJEČE,
ZASTANI I PROUČI FATIHU ZA DUŠE ŽRTAVA
NA.
E ZLO NE PONOVI !

As we commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica Genocide, it is important to reflect on the crucial support that the UN General Assembly’s Resolution designating July 11 as an “International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica” provides for the Mothers of Srebrenica and other Srebrenica survivors. This historic UN Resolution, which was adopted due to the diplomatic leadership of Ambassador Zlatko Lagumdžjia, Permanent Representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the United Nations, and his team in New York, provides international recognition of the Srebrenica Genocide and support for the survivors insofar as it proclaims the truth about the genocide from what is perhaps the most influential platform in the world.

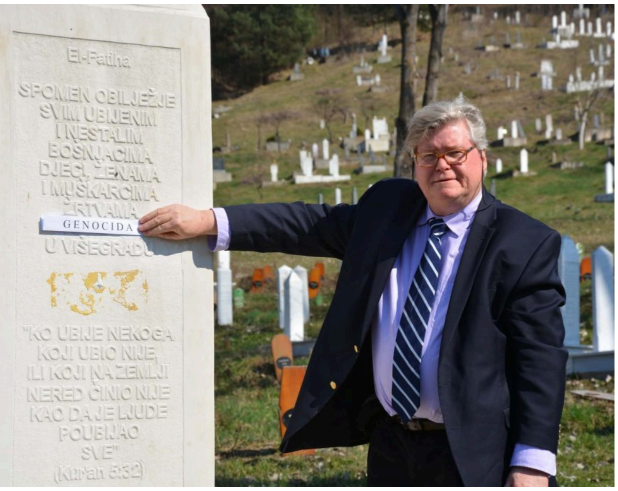
The UN Srebrenica Resolution has opened a commemorative space within which new expressions of the truth about the genocide can occur. In preparation for the 30th anniversary commemoration, the curatorial teams from the Srebrenica Memorial Center prepared important new exhibitions in cooperation with Ambassador Lagumdžjia for the United Nations Headquarters in New York, including "From Words to Violence: Lives Behind the Fields of Death" (in cooperation with BIRN), which opened June 15th, and "Legacy of Hope After Srebrenica Genocide: A New Generation's Journey," (prepared by the SMC oral history team) which opened July 7. New exhibitions have been created at the Srebrenica Memorial Center with other international partners, exhibitions which actively resist denial and support the Mothers of Srebrenica and Srebrenica survivors by raising awareness about the truth. Beyond these exhibitions at the UN, a series of academic seminars and public commemorations took place around the world. Commemorative programs occurred in Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in May and June. Ambassador Lagumdžjia hosted a commemoration at the United Nations on July 8. Srebrenica commemorations also took place across the United States, in Boston, Massachusetts, on July 10, in Hartford, Connecticut, St. Louis, Missouri, and Bowling Green, Kentucky, on July 12, and in Des Moines, Iowa, on July 13. These are just a few of the commemorations that happened around the world in memory of the victims and in support of survivors.

However, on the occasion of this impressive array of commemorative programs, and with this outpouring of love and support for the Mothers of Srebrenica and other genocide survivors, it is also important to face the realization that the Office of the High Representative and the international community have failed to implement a comprehensive program for transitional justice in BiH that would support memorialization and prevent denial and the glorification of war criminals. The High Representative, who oversees the Dayton Peace Agreement's implementation, has been unable, for example, to address the prohibition of a memorial at Pilica Cultural Center, where the atrocities conducted there were part of the Srebrenica Genocide, or to remove the mural for Ratko Mladić, one of the Srebrenica Genocide's main perpetrators, in Kalinovik.

Transitional Justice involves judicial and nonjudicial mechanisms. The ICTY proceedings led to profoundly important legal judgments and convictions, but there has also been cynicism at the small number of genocide convictions, lenient prison sentences, and early releases of those convicted of heinous crimes. Momčilo Krajišnik, who was found guilty of crimes against humanity by the ICTY, for example, was released early from prison and returned to a hero's welcome in Pale, the Republika Srpska's capital, in 2014. Further, genocide denial and the glorification of convicted war criminals continue with almost complete impunity in Republika Srpska and Serbia. Genocide denial and the glorification of war criminals threaten a repetition of the atrocities and are re-traumatizing for survivors who deserve to be protected from such psychological harm.

In response to the limits of the judicial process, it is important to implement a comprehensive policy of transitional justice mechanisms, including the human right to commemoration and memorialization. Survivors have the right to commemoration and memorialization. However, it is astonishing that survivors have been prohibited from installing memorials for the victims in places where the atrocities were part of the Srebrenica Genocide, including Kravica, Pilica, Petkovci, and Branjevo Farm. Survivors have also been prevented from installing memorials at other atrocity sites, like in Kalinovik (Barutni Magacin), Prijedor (Omarska and Trnopolje), Foča (Partizan Sports Hall), and Višegrad (Vilina Vlas). On the occasion of the 30th anniversary commemoration of the Srebrenica Genocide, the High Representative should use the Bonn Powers, which give him significant authority over Bosnia and Herzegovina's legal landscape, to create protected national memorial sites at all these locations, as well as others to be identified by survivors.

In addition to the right to memorialization, the High Representative needs to reassert the importance of the rule of law in Bosnia as a post-genocide society by ensuring the prosecution of genocide denial, hate speech, and the glorification of convicted war criminals. It is intolerable that as we commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica Genocide, a mural glorifying Ratko Mladić stands at the entrance to Kalinovik. Transitional justice principles demand that such a mural be removed. The mural must be removed to provide support for survivors of the Srebrenica Genocide.


El-Fatiha
SPOMEN OBILJEŽJE
SVIM UBIJENIM
I NESTALIM
BOSNJACIMA
DJECI, ŽENAMA
I MUŠKARCIMA
ŽRTVAMA
GENOCIDA
U VIŠEGRADU
"KO UBIJE NEKOGA
KOJI UBIO NIJE
ILI KOJI NA ZEMLJI
NERED ČINIO NIJE
KAO DA JE LJUDE
POUBIJAO
SVE"
(Kur'an 5:32)

Dr. Pettigrew restores the term 'genocide' to Stražište cemetery in an act of protest. (Photo Credit: Marketá Slavková)

As we honor the memory of the victims, let our commemoration of the Srebrenica Genocide in 2025 provide the guiding light for the implementation of a comprehensive program for transitional justice in Bosnia. The comprehensive implementation of transitional justice initiatives in support of memorialization and against denial and the glorification of war criminals would hold out promise for the transformation of the culture, fostering an inclusive democratic society with respect for human rights. Such transitional justice initiatives would hold out hope, finally, for a just and peaceful future in BiH, thereby honoring the victims and supporting genocide survivors.

Click to Watch: Dr. Pettigrew speaks on his work in Bosnia (2025)

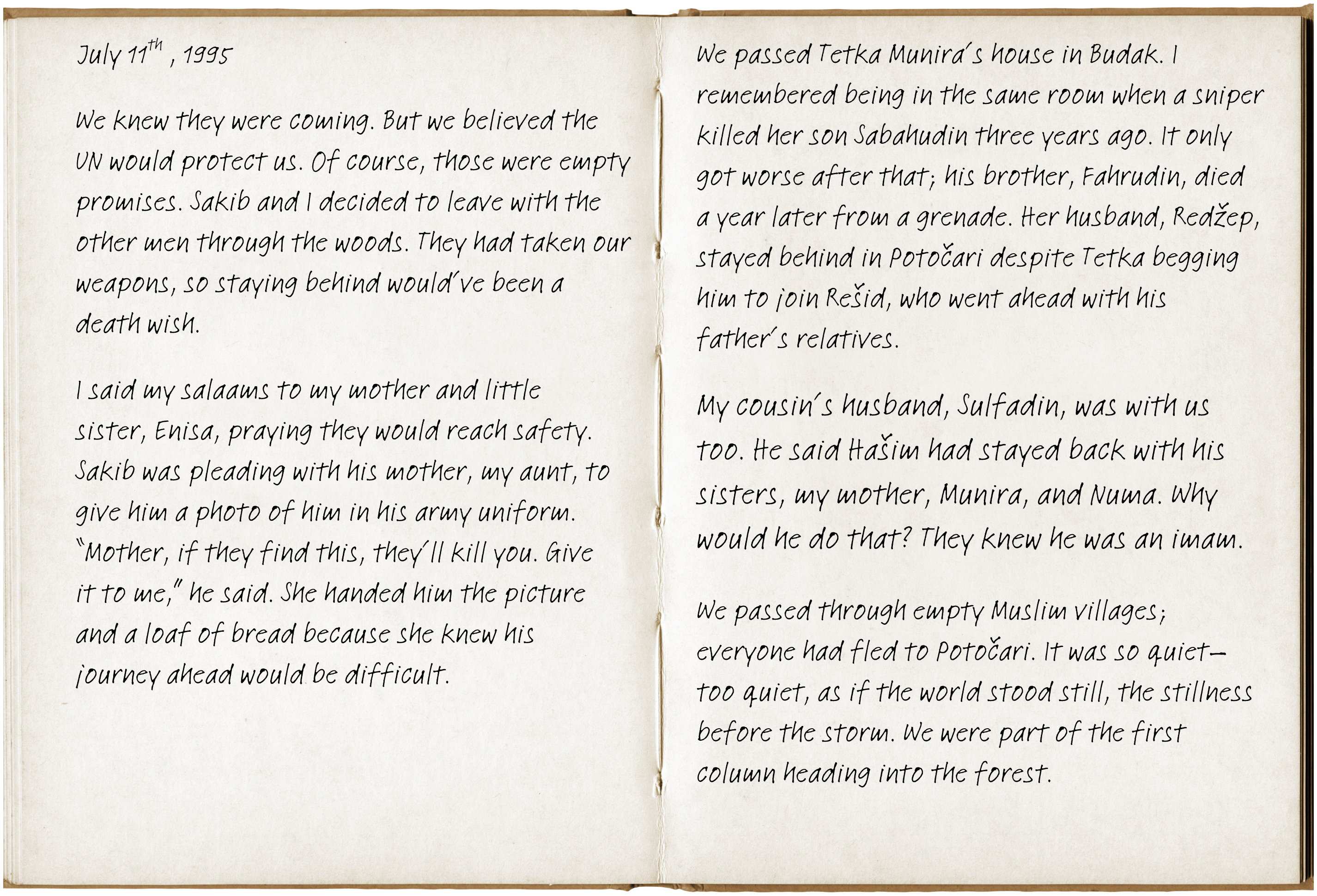
CARRYING THE SILENCE

Marching Through the Memory of Srebrenica

By Erna Alić

July 8th, 2025

I began a journey I had long heard about in stories from my family but had never experienced myself. The Marš Mira, the March for Peace, retraces the 100-kilometer route that survivors of the Srebrenica Genocide took through the forests of eastern Bosnia in July 1995. My father was one of them. Thirty years later, I walked the same path he once ran, following the echoes of his fear, his faith, and his will to live. For him, this March is a wound reopened, a trauma that was never healed. For me, however, it's my way to memorialize, remember and continue resisting. I told him I wanted to understand, even if only through a shadow of what he endured.



July 11th, 1995

We knew they were coming. But we believed the UN would protect us. Of course, those were empty promises. Sakib and I decided to leave with the other men through the woods. They had taken our weapons, so staying behind would've been a death wish.

I said my salaams to my mother and little sister, Enisa, praying they would reach safety. Sakib was pleading with his mother, my aunt, to give him a photo of him in his army uniform. "Mother, if they find this, they'll kill you. Give it to me," he said. She handed him the picture and a loaf of bread because she knew his journey ahead would be difficult.

We passed Tetka Munira's house in Budak. I remembered being in the same room when a sniper killed her son Sabahudin three years ago. It only got worse after that; his brother, Fahrudin, died a year later from a grenade. Her husband, Redžep, stayed behind in Potočari despite Tetka begging him to join Rešid, who went ahead with his father's relatives.

My cousin's husband, Sulfadin, was with us too. He said Hašim had stayed back with his sisters, my mother, Munira, and Numa. Why would he do that? They knew he was an imam.

We passed through empty Muslim villages; everyone had fled to Potočari. It was so quiet—too quiet, as if the world stood still, the stillness before the storm. We were part of the first column heading into the forest.

July 8th, 2025

That first day, I joined the group "Djeca Boraca Srebrenica," composed of the children of our resistance fighters, half of whom had lost their fathers, and half of whom had fathers who survived but carried the weight of loss from the genocide.

We begin the March in Nezuk, the first liberated zone in 1995. As we move through villages, people come out to meet us, cheering, crying, offering coffee and sweets. Children hand us candy, praying that our path goes well. The air is thick with both mourning and pride. Over 6,000 people are on the March, and the line is endless with groups coming from every part of the world to remind us of a genocide that should not happen again to anyone anywhere.

I see flags, shirts, and keffiyehs, a sea of solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Gaza. Each step ties our pain to theirs as they, too, walked miles from one safe zone to another, each breath a reminder that survival itself is resistance.

We pass the sites of mass graves that serve as stark evidence of the horrors that were inflicted here. Rain starts to fall that first day, and of course, I forgot my jacket, but a man offering fruit makes me a poncho from the plastic bag the fruit was carried in. In that small act of kindness, I feel the strength of community, how even in grief, we found each other.

July 9th, 2025

On the second day, rain poured without pause. The trail up to the 1000-meter Mount Udrč turned to mud. My shoes sank, my clothes clung to me, and the cold and exhaustion begged me to stop. Yet I thought of those who fled via this same mountain barefoot, starving, and hunted. When I struggled to get up, a girl caught my arm and helped me rise. We climbed together, hand in hand, strangers bound by the same memory and purpose. In that moment, I realized survival was never a solitary action, but a collective one.

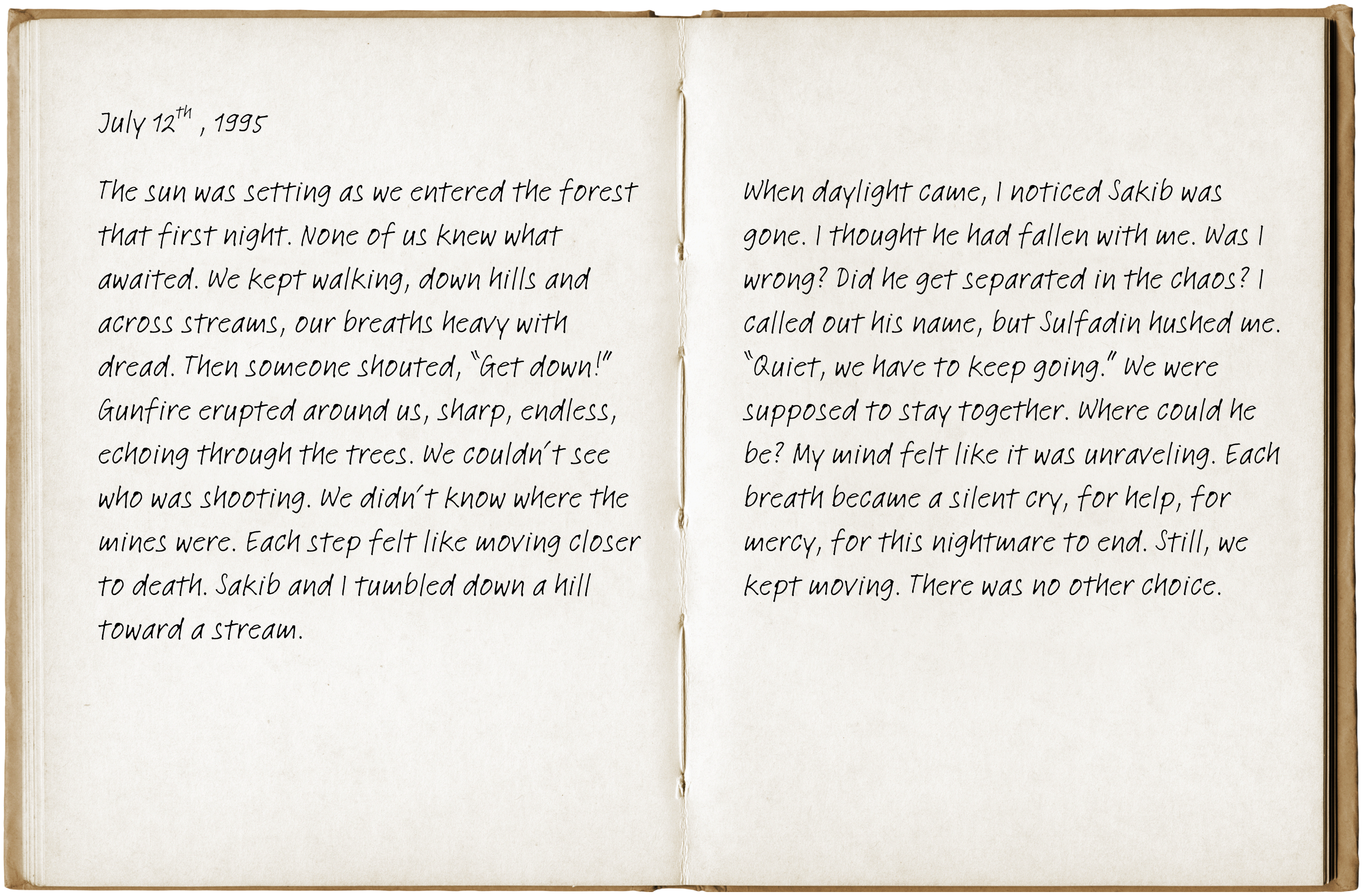
At the top of the hill, a banner read Herojska Cerska—the Heroic Cerska—my mother's village, which I always dreaded visiting but had never felt more grateful to see. I passed by family members and felt the familiarity of my surroundings.

Click to Watch: Walk in the rain

I did not know how I would make it that night in the campsite, but I realized a relative lived nearby. She had just returned from the United States—her timing uncanny—and welcomed me to her home. She washed my clothes, served me hot food, and filled the room with laughter. Hospitality, I realized, is our inheritance, and a communal value that helped us survive. Family is our stronghold. Later, my father came with dry clothes and a jacket. He said he'd worried about me all day. Fathers worry, even when they've survived worse. He told me how it rained just like this when he crossed the Jadar River to go up Udrc.

July 10th, 2025

The third day, they say, is the hardest, but how could I have believed them after what happened the day before? By the day's end, however, I realized that it's emotional pain that creates physical pain. As we got closer to the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center, the March's destination, my thoughts kept circling back to my father. I imagined him around my age, terrified, praying with every step to make it out alive.



July 12th, 1995

The sun was setting as we entered the forest that first night. None of us knew what awaited. We kept walking, down hills and across streams, our breaths heavy with dread. Then someone shouted, "Get down!" Gunfire erupted around us, sharp, endless, echoing through the trees. We couldn't see who was shooting. We didn't know where the mines were. Each step felt like moving closer to death. Sakib and I tumbled down a hill toward a stream.

When daylight came, I noticed Sakib was gone. I thought he had fallen with me. Was I wrong? Did he get separated in the chaos? I called out his name, but Sulfadin hushed me. "Quiet, we have to keep going." We were supposed to stay together. Where could he be? My mind felt like it was unraveling. Each breath became a silent cry, for help, for mercy, for this nightmare to end. Still, we kept moving. There was no other choice.

July 10th, 2025

For my father, the forest was a graveyard; he lost his closest cousin and best friend here. Today, I keep up with youth who have lost their fathers. Sons and daughters of resistance, carrying the weight of pride and sorrow. Their bloodline is one of bravery, yet they would trade every honor just to hold their fathers again. We are the next generation, the keepers of memory, the heartbeat of identity.

As we finally reach Potočari, white tombstones begin to rise from the hills like a sea of ghosts. A sea of white shirts moves toward them, children, descendants, the living walking among their martyrs. The Mothers of Srebrenica stand waiting as we pass the Memorial, watching as if we were their own, returned from the woods their sons never left. I walk past the names carved into stone, family names clustered together. I search the crowd for my father, for my aunts Numa and Munira. When I finally spot them, my eyes blur with tears before I even reach them. My father wraps me in a hug, the distance between 1995 and 2025 closing. I know I didn't do this because they needed me to, but because I needed to remember. To tell them, without words, that I will never forget.

I march with the heavy weight of memory, the inheritance of resistance, resilience, and survival.

I thought I knew everything about this genocide; I had studied it, read it, carried it in words, but only now have I truly *felt* it. I had walked the earth that remembers, the land that has held their stories in stillness, the stories of those who were martyred, who we could not hear from.

I soon found myself alone among the gravestones as everyone went to pray. I sat among the rows of white tombstones, surrounded by a deep silence. A verse from the Qur'an came to mind: *"Never say that those martyred in the cause of Allah are dead; in fact, they are alive, but you do not perceive it."*(2:154). So, I know our martyrs, who are beautiful white doves, are soaring past us. They will one day, God willing, share their stories, and until then it is our duty to honor them, speak truth to justice, and remember.

The *Marš Mira* is not just a memorial, but it is a pilgrimage through history and resilience. It transforms pain and grief into purpose. For the survivors, it can be closure. For us, their children, it is an inheritance. To retrace the steps from Nezuk to Potocari is to show that we are still here. Thirty years later, Srebrenica and its people are still here, and we need not just carry the silence but also listen to them.

I dedicate this to Djeca Boraca Srebrenica, my family members who survived and the ones who were martyred, and most importantly, my father Enver Alić, whose resilience and bravery are the reason I am who I am.

SEEDS (SJEME)

By Erna Alić

They thought they could bury us, but didn’t know we
were seeds…

Sprouting like never before, hundreds, thousands, and
more

The pillars of white see their descendants,

See our brothers and sisters growing from all parts of
the world

The plaques of family names continue, but not because
we are dead, but because we continue to live

They thought they could hide us but didn’t know our
doves of resilience…

Our mothers who stood in front of the monsters
demanding justice,

Munira, Fata, Saliha, Hajra, Numa, Aza

Demanding their sons, brothers, fathers, their PEOPLE
be found

Every single bone, even if they are kilometers apart
from Zeleni Jadar to Kamenica

They thought we would disappear, but we have only
returned…

Our lands taken back from their grasp,

They thought they could build a church where our
homes were

But we rebuilt homes despite you and the cross you
used to justify tearing us away

Our minarets rise again, bigger, louder, and more
beautiful than ever

Our gardens are full of bloom with plums and pears
waiting for our loved ones to pick from them.

We return to our villages, our identity, our faith,
because we are Bošnjaks & we will always be

They thought we would forget, but we will always
remember…

The pillars of white in the lands soaked with blood
remind us of the crimes that were committed

The Bukva trees that stand so tall and white will make
you cower as they are our witnesses to what they heard,
what they saw, and why they turned red

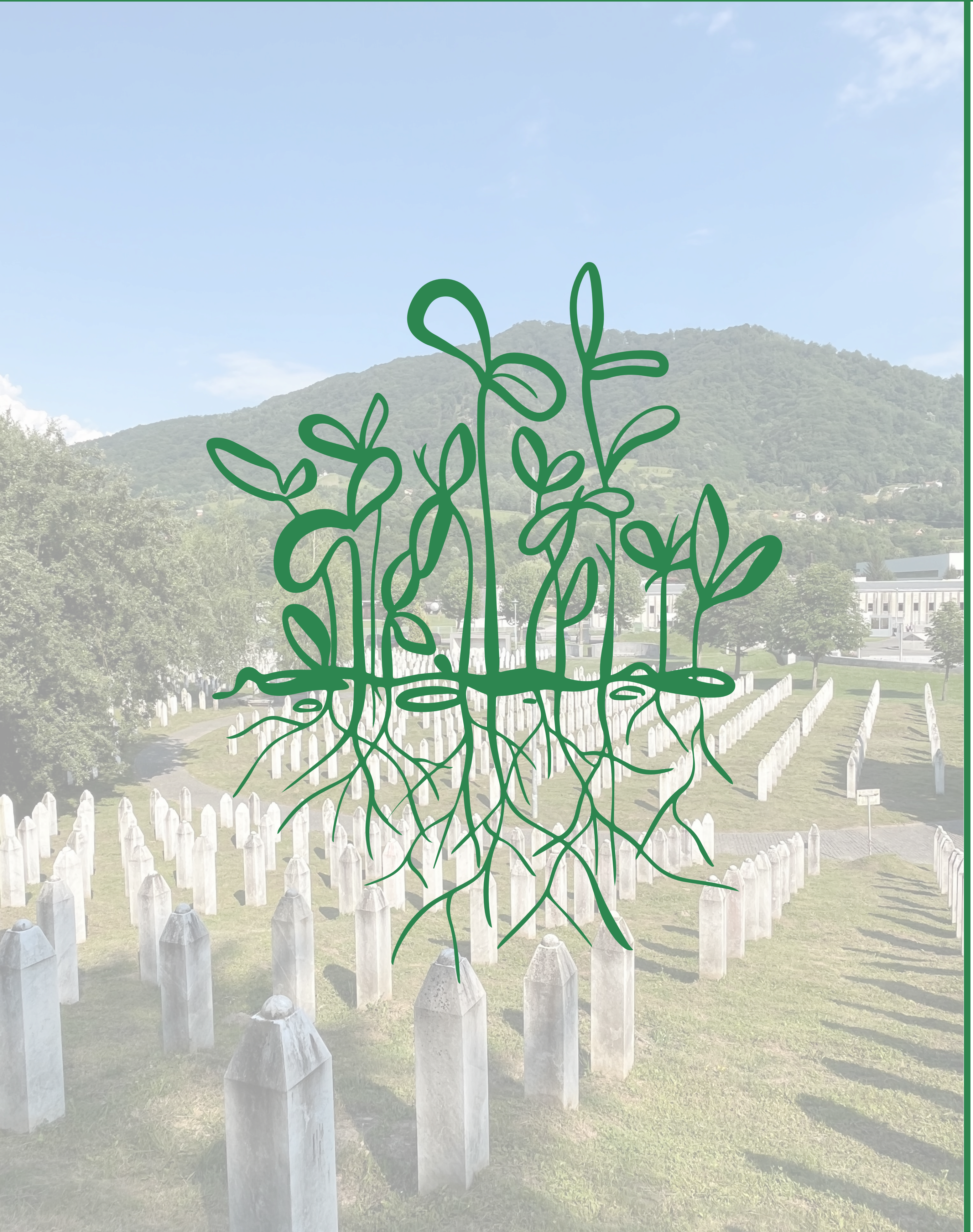
Our children carry the stories of their fathers and
forefathers, and they will never forget

Our survivors bear witness to you now, and our martyrs
will bear witness on the Day

They thought we would die, but Allah (swt) says…

“Never say that those martyred in the cause of Allah a
re dead—in fact, they are alive! But you do not perceive
it.”

Click to Listen: Erna’s Reading of “Seeds (Sjeme)”



Moving Within and Beyond Genocide as Framework

By Bekir Hodžić

The grave of my paternal uncle Bekir–my namesake–at the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center

I grew up the son of Bosnian genocide survivors, and specifically, my mother and father both escaped Srebrenica. That fact, for better or worse, influences much of my life. I carry the name of my paternal uncle, Bekir, who was among the over 8,000 men and boys slaughtered in the Srebrenica genocide and from whom my family buried a few remains at the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center in 2012. My paternal grandfather, Avdo, also lost his life to Srebrenica, and we have yet to find and properly bury him. Similar tragic losses imbue all sides of my family. I have seen them manifest themselves in the trauma, silence, and heartbreak that has often filled my home. And I sometimes see them manifest themselves in the longing I feel for a remedy for all this pain. Alas, no such cure exists. So I write. And advocate. And study. And my family and I embrace the joys of our lives, the happiness we feel regardless of and with the past. We sustain ourselves, however we can, while remembering.

This contribution emerges from the work these daily reckonings and survivals have caused me to pursue. In it, I intend to briefly overview the use of "genocide" as a way to understand the violence that rocked Bosnia in the 1990s. I cover its formal uses and advantages, plus its limits and the effort that needs to be put into investigating Bosnia past the term. I do so on the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, and within the context of this anthology, to highlight both the good that "genocide" has done as a title and the possibilities that exploring other vernaculars might expose us to when combined with genocide.

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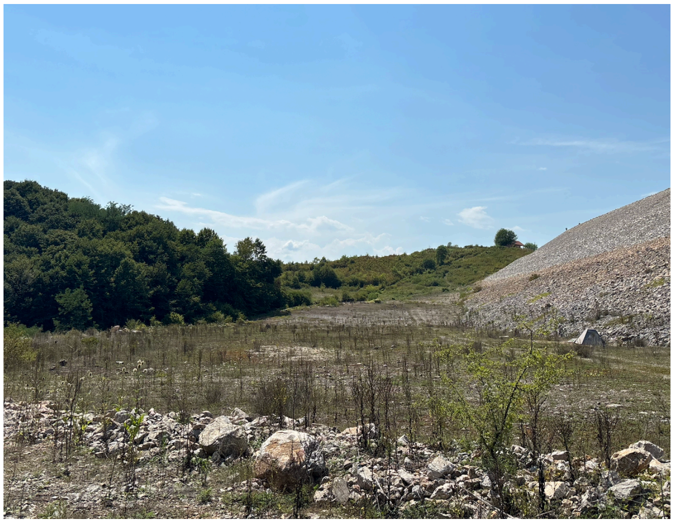


The Petkovci dam execution site, where my uncle Bekir, based on survivor testimony, was taken and killed during the Srebrenica genocide. To this day, government authorities in the Republika Srpska prevent survivor groups from placing a memorial at the site.

Genocide mediated Bosnia as an event from all perspectives throughout its occurrence, whether that of the international media, diplomats, or individuals on the ground; indeed, it perhaps represents the first genocide, up until that point, to so wholly become consumed inside the term's legal, socio-political, and academic worlds. Global politicians debated genocide's applicability to Bosnia and shifted policy depending on how they perceived that application. The Bosnian state filed a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) accusing Serbia of the crime, leading to a finding of genocide in Srebrenica, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia's (ICTY) prosecutions similarly often involved genocide charges. Survivors recalled stories of harrowing violence to an eager press, calling on the globe to save them from genocide. And it continues to mediate Bosnia today. Genocide denial, particularly from Bosnian-Serb government officials, and the glorification of war criminals, define the country's ethnicized political landscape. Srebrenica is regularly raised by lawyers and public figures as a parallel to other ongoing atrocities. A growing memorial infrastructure inside and outside the polity, moreover, works to commemorate the genocide and forever preserve its memories.

This centering, of course, holds immense value. Survivors and associations founded by them recognize their experience—rightfully—as genocide and use the title as a platform to advocate for wider acknowledgement of what they endured. Indeed, it comprises a near-universally understood phrase that can readily motivate global actors to push for meeting Bosnia's current post-genocide needs within various forums. It offers a rhetoric through which anyone, whether a survivor or not, can better grasp what Bosnia faced and its human gravity. On that note, genocide represents a powerful medium through which to educate people about Bosnia, particularly in places like the United States that integrate Holocaust and genocide studies into school curriculum. More practically, genocide opens formal international legal avenues—which Bosnians have pursued—trying perpetrators and receiving some level of justice for victims. These reasons, and countless others not mentioned, show why, even now, Bosniaks and related groups so emphasize genocide in conversations around their still-raw plight.

But in underscoring that importance, we cannot allow genocide to become the sole factor through which we reckon with this violence. For all its benefits, genocide can constitute a limiting language. It does not—at least textually—encompass cultural destruction or what we now call "ethnic cleansing," despite the frequency of both strategies in most widely accepted genocides. It constructs temporalities where violence is finite, and does not address how genocide survivors might continue to face revictimization through tactics like the systematic denial of commemoration. It approaches extermination from a perpetrator-centric angle—what matters inside genocide's legal calculus, for example, is usually how victimizers conceptualized their crimes, not how their victims experienced them. With that, it, as interpreted by international judicial bodies, requires a highly-specified intent, obscuring our ability to respond to violences that do not exactly fit its parameters and providing a loophole for génocidaires to escape accountability. It fashions binaries between different ethnic groups that neglect the relational complexities of life under genocide. And it does not always account for the human reality of existence before, during, and after genocide—the bonds among different ethnicities that led to both betrayal and allyship when annihilation came, the horror of seeing unimaginable violence so frequently that you become dull to it, and the pain of living every day knowing that your relatives might rest in an unmarked mass grave that you might never be able to retrieve them from.

The wooded landscape near the ancestral villages of both my parents in Bosnia, once marked by violence, and now filled with a (forever altered) return to Bosniak life.

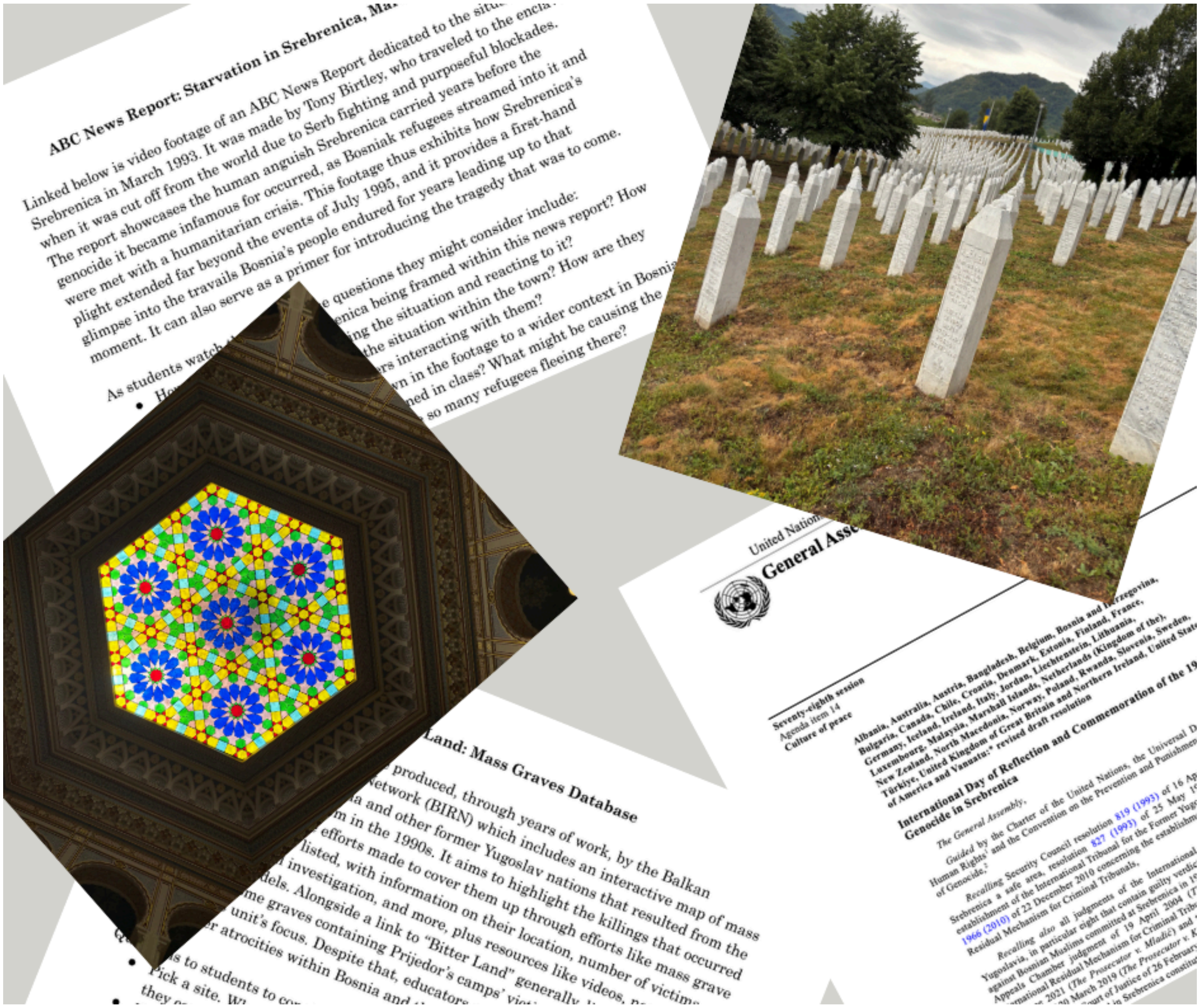
So while working within genocide's frameworks remains critical for academic study and social advocacy around Bosnia, that should not stop us from seeking out other, non-genocide centered, means of talking about it. If we wish to speak to its totalizing, humane nature, we need to open ourselves to survivor realities that lay outside the stereotypical archetypes that genocide crafts. We need to theorize new concepts that go beyond genocide's limits and focus on the lived, peopled networks that Bosnia implicated and implicates. Said otherwise, we need to find further languages for explaining this violence. In doing so, we additionally need to underline the role of survival in all the above, for another gap of genocide is its tendency to make its subjects perpetual victims; Bosnia's horrors, with all their devastations, also engendered individual, communal, and national resiliences that deserve our attention, emphasis, and care. They forge potential paths for remembrance, healing, and dialogue that we should not sideline. Put simply, we should make "genocide" a partner in how we speak about Bosnia, not an end-all-be-all.

* * *

My father and grandmother sitting together on the lands they lived on before the Bosnian war and genocide occurred, and where my grandmother still lives, 30 years on from the losses and displacement she faced during that period.

As we look back on the three decades since Srebrenica and the struggles, triumphs, and complexities that have filled those years, it is therefore essential for us to think about Bosnia on two levels: one that interrogates it as genocide and contextualizes it within larger international and local uses of the term, and another that implores us to contemplate its events as more than just genocide. Said otherwise, we need to discuss its atrocities conventionally and unconventionally. We have to, if we wish to fully honor the people the genocide marked. Although I will never know my paternal uncle, grandfather, or any of the countless other relatives I lost to the Bosnian war and genocide, nor will I ever (hopefully) know what it is like to persist under such violence, I can strive to uncover some of what their lives meant for them then, and for us now. That is difficult, yet necessary work. And I will continue to do it, as a student and as a son, nephew, and human, as long as I can-for my family, my community, myself, and all those harmed, in Bosnia and elsewhere, for nothing more than who they were and are.

By Dr. Sarah Snyder and Bekir Hodžić



Collection of primary sources and related materials drawn from our curriculum.

When we first met each other through our shared connection to a Holocaust education center in Connecticut—Sarah, its director, and Bekir, the son of Bosniak genocide survivors—on our many conversations drifted to the topic of education around the Bosnian Genocide, particularly within the United States. While we both understood Bosnia's importance as a case of genocide, we quickly realized that, for American educators, few comprehensive resources existed that offered them an accessible entry point for teaching about. That fact had critical negative consequences. Given that many teachers lack much time to teach about genocide, even in states with Holocaust and genocide education mandates, this paucity meant that few would likely endeavor to discuss Bosnia for ease's sake, and those who did would have to undergo immense effort to supplement what existed with their own materials. But that fact also inspired us. If there was so little educational matter on Bosnia for these instructors, why not generate something ourselves?

From that spark, we embarked on a project that has spawned years, with us developing curricula on the Bosnian War and Genocide for classroom use around the United States and disseminating it through various means. In that process, we have crafted four units, complete with background information, activities, source packets, and more: Bosnian history before the War and Genocide; the Siege of Sarajevo; the Srebrenica Genocide; and Prijedor & Concentration Camps in Bosnia. Our curriculum is built on the belief that learning about genocide and mass atrocities requires more than memorizing dates and statistics; it demands engagement with the human stories at the center of these histories. Through carefully designed lesson packets focused on the Bosnian Genocide, we invite students to become active participants in historical understanding, moving from passive learners to critical thinkers, storytellers, and educators in their own right.

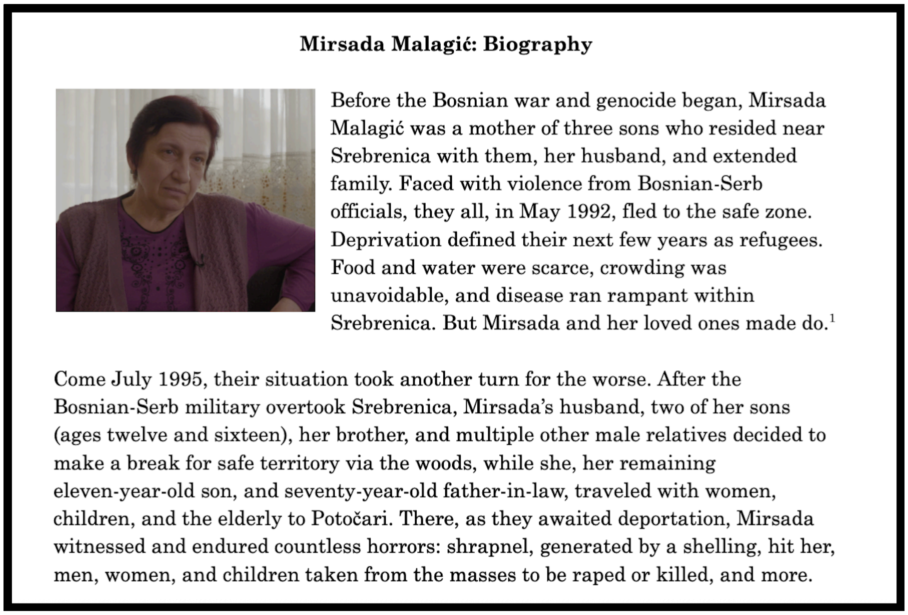
At the foundation of our approach are four interconnected pedagogical principles that guide how students encounter this difficult material. We emphasize community engagement and public history work, giving students opportunities to share their learning beyond the classroom. We center storytelling and testimony, creating space for survivor voices and personal narratives that restore humanity to historical accounts. We incorporate comparative analysis, helping students understand both the unique features of the Bosnian Genocide and its connections to other atrocities. And throughout, we attend to the profound silences that genocide creates: the stories that cannot or will not be told, the questions that remain unanswered, and the ethical responsibility we have as listeners and learners.

Together, we have aimed to use these principles to create a curriculum that honors survivors, challenges students to think deeply about violence and its aftermath, and prepares them to carry these lessons forward into their communities and their lives.

Community and Public History:

One powerful aspect of our curriculum is how it transforms students from learners into teachers, giving them the chance to share their knowledge with peers, educators, and the broader community. Our Siege of Sarajevo lesson packet exemplifies this approach: students dive deep into primary source artifacts from the event, examining real objects and documents that bring history to life in their hands. From there, they take ownership of their learning by creating everything from individual displays to full scale museum exhibits that showcase not just the historical facts, but their own personal connections to the material. Students can express their understanding through poetry, music, visual art, and other creative mediums that make the history resonate on a human level. Through this process, they're engaging in public history work, becoming historians, curators, and storytellers who can share meaningful narratives with their community. When they present their work to the public, they're not just demonstrating what they've learned; they're teaching us all something new about empathy, resilience, and the importance of history in the present.

Storytelling and Testimony:



Mirsada Malagić: Biography

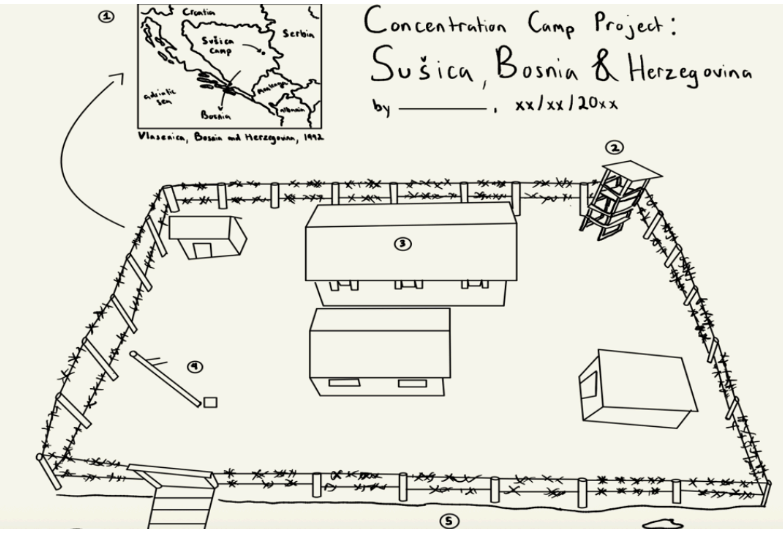
Before the Bosnian war and genocide began, Mirsada Malagić was a mother of three sons who resided near Srebrenica with them, her husband, and extended family. Faced with violence from Bosnian-Serb officials, they all, in May 1992, fled to the safe zone. Deprivation defined their next few years as refugees. Food and water were scarce, crowding was unavoidable, and disease ran rampant within Srebrenica. But Mirsada and her loved ones made do.[1]

Come July 1995, their situation took another turn for the worse. After the Bosnian-Serb military overtook Srebrenica, Mirsada's husband, two of her sons (ages twelve and sixteen), her brother, and multiple other male relatives decided to make a break for safe territory via the woods, while she, her remaining eleven-year-old son, and seventy-year-old father-in-law, traveled with women, children, and the elderly to Potočari. There, as they awaited deportation, Mirsada witnessed and endured countless horrors: shrapnel, generated by a shelling, hit her, men, women, and children taken from the masses to be raped or killed, and more.

A survivor background sheet used in the Srebrenica Genocide lesson plan activity.

Storytelling and testimony form a piece of the heart of our curriculum, creating space for personal narratives that honor individual experiences within historical and present-day events. In our Srebrenica Genocide lesson packet, we've designed an activity that builds scaffolded knowledge through survivor testimonies and primary sources, allowing students to gradually develop a nuanced understanding of what those impacted by genocide endured. We encourage students to ask questions and think critically about each individual's experience, moving beyond statistics to see the human faces and voices behind the history. By centering testimony and personal narrative, we not only teach about genocide, but help students understand how to listen deeply, honor survivor voices, and recognize both what is shared and what has been forever lost.

Comparative Analysis:


Concentration Camp Project:
Sušica, Bosnia & Herzegovina
by ________, xx/xx/20xx
①
Croatia
Serbia
Sušica camp
Adriatic Sea
Montenegro
Albania
Bosnia
Vlasenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1992
②
③
④
⑤

An example of a concentration camp map students might create in the Prijedor lesson plan.

We also wanted our curriculum to help educators and students comparatively analyze different genocides, mass atrocities, and violent structures. That desire most emerges within our Prijedor & Concentration Camps lesson plan, where we have students learn about concentration camps in the Bosnian context and juxtapose these institutions with similar camps established during other violences. More specifically, students conduct a mapmaking activity, learning about a Bosnian and non-Bosnian camp, drawing a map of the former, and then placing the two into conversation via visual and factual comparison. Through all this, we emphasize allowing students to note similarities and differences between these sites—though they, for example, might have each served as spaces for deporting a targeted group, one might have primarily employed torture upon a political minority, while the other comprised a extermination camp aimed at a ethnic collective. In doing so, students can come to recognize the diverse uses of concentration camps as a genocidal tool, opening them to a broader understanding of how genocides are both unique and frequently the products of similar ideologies, weapons, and socio-political movements. And such a comparative approach assists American teachers who must meet state Holocaust education requirements, giving them an avenue to raise Holocaust-era camps within a wider unit on Bosnia.

Silences:

A theme we wished to imbue throughout our curriculum is that of silence. One of genocide's central goals is to produce silences—to so decimate a people that they can no longer speak to their lives and the suffering they faced. Indeed, even after a genocide ends, perpetrators and others will usually deny that it did, or claim that it was not as bad as some might think. And beyond, from a survivor perspective, there are stories, feelings, and thoughts that come from their experiences that they either cannot share or, rightfully, do not want to share. We thus, at various points in our lesson plans, have teachers and students reflect on what information they do not know and cannot glean from the source material before them. During our testimony activity in the Srebrenica lesson plan, for instance, we ask students to think about what questions they developed about a particular survivor's life story were not answered by watching their oral history, inviting a larger consideration of the purposes and genesis of survivor silence. These engagements accordingly allow students to grapple with what remains unsaid, the stories that can never be told, and the gaps left in families and communities by genocide, revealing it for the human toll it takes. And they help students forge an ethical approach to interacting with stories about genocide, one where they do not seek to needlessly extract knowledge from personal pain, but instead take it as it is and allow for survivors to set the parameters of any discussion.

Conclusion:

Regardless of our progress, we continue to work on this curriculum and share it with educators of all backgrounds, so to strengthen these materials and ensure that they genuinely teach and affect students positively. We are working on several additional units to build upon our prior work and add new dimensions to it, particularly from a wider socio-political and international lens. We, for instance, have planned that lessons that will explore the history, culture, and identity of Bosniaks—alongside other Bosnian groups—beyond the confines of the Bosnian War and Genocide, thus allowing students to understand how atrocity emerged while fostering curiosity and empathy around these peoples that go past victimhood narratives. We also plan units on topics like international justice in Bosnia—from the role of the ICTY to local courts and non-profits—and the ongoing genocide denial seen across Bosnia—and especially within some of the nation's schools.

When we started this initiative, we never expected it to reach as many people and garner as much support as it has. That, in our view, speaks to an undeniable hunger for bringing this history into the classroom, one that we should not ignore, but instead feed, for it can open students to new ways of thinking about mass violence, what it means for our present, and what they can do to address. And with that, it provides another avenue for fortifying the memory of those senselessly killed in the Bosnian War and Genocide, preserving their strength, resistance, and loss for future generations to mourn, learn from, and honor. More than just continue this effort, we hope to motivate others to do similar work for Bosnia, and for countless other genocides that warrant deeper attention within classes in the United States and throughout the world.

A photo of the aforementioned collaborators after a day of discussing our project.

* * *

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The Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights (CGHR)

CGHR's mission is to understand and prevent genocide and mass atrocity crimes. In doing so, CGHR takes a critical prevention approach.

On the one hand, we grapple with critical human rights issues, including the most pressing 21st century challenges that may give rise to genocide, atrocity crimes, and related interventions. On the other hand, we use a critical lens to rethink assumptions and offer alternative ideas and solutions.

* * *

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