Waiting for a Funeral in Srebrenica: the Tenth Anniversary of the Fall of Srebrenica

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Waiting for a Funeral in Srebrenica: The Tenth Anniversary of the Fall of Srebrenica

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“We should pity God who sees us the way we are.”
— Highway sign in Vlasenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina

It is now nearly ten years since the night of July 7, 1995, when Hatidja Mehmedovic said goodbye to her husband and two high-school-age sons as they fled into the forests overlooking Srebrenica and became three of the 8,106 persons missing in the town’s massacre. “What other mother can say this,” she asks me, “that what she wants for her two sons are not wives for them or even grandchildren for me but coffins. Yes, what I want are coffins to bury my two sons.”

On July 11, 2005, the tenth anniversary of the fall of Srebrenica to the Bosnian Serbs, at least 50,000 visitors and representatives of 42 countries around the world are expected to come to Srebrenica to witness the burial of another 500 bodies alongside the 1,300 victims already interred at the memorial cemetery in the nearby village of Potocari. The guests will mark the anniversary by visiting a new Memorial Center, attending seminars, and even, if they wish, visiting the site of a mass grave left over from the savagery of ten years ago.

Every June for the past three years, I have come to visit Hatidja in her old house in the hills overlooking Srebrenica. She is entirely alone — not just without her family, but without her old neighbors who either perished or fled a decade ago. They left behind their war-scarred homes as an inadvertent gift for the Serbian refugees from the other corners of Bosnia who now make up the core of Srebrenica’s population. When I ask if she is frightened to be there alone and with unsympathetic strangers for neighbors, she replies: “How could I be afraid, when the worst things that I ever feared have already happened to me?” For us, Bosnia is old news. For Hatidja
Mehmedovic and the other survivors, mostly women now living alone who lost a husband, child, parent, or — as is often the case — an entire family in that brutal conflict of the last decade, the wounds of the war are constantly reopened.

One egregious example is the exploitation of a videotape shot in 1995 by a Serbian paramilitary unit, the Scorpions. On June 1 of this year [2005], the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia at The Hague released to the public video showing the execution of six Bosnian men. Hatidja and the other survivors of the lost have watched the daily re-broadcasts of the video on Bosnian television, each time showing a bit more footage and giving them the cruel hope that they might see the execution of their husbands, sons or brothers. At least, then they’d know.

In the village of Liplje, about an hour’s drive from Srebrenica, I found some of the same eyes that repeatedly searched this video. A Bosnian woman and her daughter sat by a newly excavated mass gravesite, watching silently — as they had for two weeks since the grave was opened — in the hope that among the 134 bodies found so far there would be some evidence of the boy lost from their family ten years ago.

In fact, the war is not really over. It’s just that during the past decade it’s evolved from a war of ethnic cleansing against the living to a war over the remains of the dead. This second phase began after the Dayton Peace Accords in November 1995 provided for the prosecution of war crimes. As The Hague handed down indictments, the Serbian perpetrators hastened to re-bury the corpses. According to Emir
Ibrahimovic, a local prosecutor investigating the grave site at Liplje, the Serbs had at first been rather careless with the evidence. “In July 1995, near Srebrenica and along the Drina River,” he told me, “bodies had been left in ravines along the roadsides. Some were lightly buried under a thin layer of dirt, and others had bones sticking up into the air.”

From 1992 to 1995, the Serbian paramilitaries had turned the war crimes of Bosnia into public spectacles not unlike the lynchings in the American South. Like the Klansmen and the local whites in the South who had their pictures taken beside the tortured and hanging victims of a “Negro barbeque,” there was nothing discreet about the Bosnian Serbs. They wanted you to know. Spray-painted slogans or initials on the walls of one destroyed house after another remain visible today, taking credit for the various Serbian paramilitary units. A victim’s family members or neighbors were often forced to watch tortures, gang rapes and executions while the perpetrators occasionally photographed or videotaped themselves with the victims. For the Serbian paramilitaries — Arkan’s Tigers, the Frankies, or the now famous Scorpions — these were trophy crimes to be saved for the record and shown off to the folks back home.

Until I visited my first mass gravesite near Vlaslenica in the summer 2003, my thoughts on the war in Bosnia were focused primarily on that defiant sense of impunity that had characterized Serbian conduct. The Vlaslenica grave forced me to
comprehend the heart of a much deeper darkness. The grave divulged a cruelty that had extended genocide beyond crimes against the Bosnian people to crimes against their dead.

At that excavation, I met Polish émigré anthropologist Eva Klonowski, who has become my guide to crimes against the dead that followed the peace of 1995. She explained that the Vlaslenica site was not a primary grave but a secondary or tertiary grave where bodies that had been bulldozed out of other gravesites were commingled and then dumped into this new grave. As a result, the Serbs who wanted to prevent identification of the dead — and thus prevent or delay identification of those who perpetrated these crimes — gained an advantage over the forensic anthropologists like Klonowski who have had to struggle to identify bodies whose parts might lie scattered in several graves or are part of a composite skeleton made from the bones of several bodies.

The odds, however, have shifted in favor of the missing persons. Since 1996, the ICMP (International Commission on Missing Persons) has been responsible for finding and identifying what it currently estimates are more than 25,000 persons missing from the wars of the former Yugoslavia in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, and Kosovo. In 2002, ICMP introduced DNA testing. The traditional forensic techniques had been painstakingly slow and had yielded limited results. In 2001, for example, there were 52 identifications. In 2002 — the first year using
DNA testing — ICMP produced 518 matches. It has given those working on the side of the missing a certain sense of satisfaction and confidence in the final outcome. The head of Sarajevo-based ICMP, Kathryne Bomberger, says convincingly, “This is now a good news story in that we can’t always end someone’s pain but we can now end someone’s uncertainty.” And ICMP’s use of DNA identification has thrown the Serbian war against the Bosnian dead into retreat.

This year, I return to Hatidja Mehmedovic to see if the remains of her husband and sons have been found. I am not her only visitor. She is a regular stop on the tours of journalists, NGOs and diplomats who come to Srebrenica. There is even a photo of her with Paul Wolfowitz on her living room wall, although she doesn’t recall who he was.

After this visit with her, I stop at a café in Srebrenica. A few minutes later, a group of Americans with the International Red Cross (ICRC) pulls into the café parking lot. They had stopped to see Hatidja at her house but she was not there. I want to tell them her story, to speak for her, but I can’t. In this last visit with Hatidja, I tell her that I won’t trouble her to repeat her story again. But she does tell it. Within a few sentences, I realize why she repeats the story and why I have come. As she speaks, her sons are planting a tree in the yard, kicking a battered football, or bringing her a simple gift, and in this shift from the past tense to the present, her sons are alive again.

Bosnia is the zip code for the heart of every Balkan cynic. Yet, hope lies in some details. You find it watching Eva Klonowski listening to what the bones tell her or in ICMP’s relentless pursuit of DNA evidence. On June 9, 2005, the Srebrenica-Potocari Foundation published the official list of persons who have been identified in the past year and are to be buried in the July ceremony. Once again, the husband and sons of Hatidja Mehmedovic were not on the list, and they will not be among the 500 new bodies buried this July 11 at the Srebrenica-Potocari Memorial.

The search, however, goes on. In the words of one of ICMP’s anthropologists, Cheryl Katzmarzyc, “I will have done my job if one day I can identify the bodies and that woman will have coffins for her sons.” And I’ll make one more trip on another July 11 for their burial at Potocari. Then I’ll be able to stop coming back to Srebrenica.

Editor’s Note:

Nick Hayes has worked and traveled extensively in the former Yugoslavia since 1994. He was in Bosnia in late May and early June 2005, conducting background research for a report by Fred de Sam Lazaro of “The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer” broadcast on the tenth anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre. This article originally appeared in Utne.com (July 2005) and is reprinted with its permission. See also Missing 2004 (p. 43) by David Paul Lange, Headwaters: A CSB/SJU Faculty Journal 22 (2005): 43.