

Srebrenica: An Anniversary to Remember

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, July 6, 2005

When Americans came together to celebrate the Fourth of July it was one big party from coast to coast. A week later, July 11th is an anniversary few of us remember, and one we won't celebrate with fireworks and picnics.

Ten years ago, in the small town of Srebrenica, Serb forces marched more than 7,000 unarmed Muslim men and boys away from their families and slaughtered them. It was the worst atrocity Europe has seen since World War II.

The massacre in this village in eastern Bosnia, marked the climax of a brutal war that engulfed the former Yugoslavia for three-and-a-half years. In this country the size of Maryland and across the Adriatic Sea from Italy, more than 150,000 people died-that's the World Trade Center fifty times over.

Before the war, Kada Hotic worked in textile factory in the heart of mountainous mining country. She remembers life there as most Bosnians do: "We had a comfortable flat. We were not rich... but we had enough for a decent life. I had nice clothes. We went for a summer vacation every year-fishing, boating. We had barbecues, sang a lot and had friends over for drinks."

The war changed all that. On July 11, 1995, Kada lost every man in her family: her son, husband, two brothers, and brother-in-law.

After a horrific night of random executions and rapes, the Muslim women of Srebrenica were ordered to take their small children and elderly relatives and climb onto buses for the 50-mile drive to Tuzla, in northeast Bosnia, outside of Serb-controlled territory. The women were told their men and boys would follow on foot. It was a cruel ruse. Within a few hours, thousands had their throats slit or were lined up, shot, and piled into mass graves. Only a few escaped through the woods.

Meanwhile, in humanitarian relief tents on the Tuzla airport tarmac, traumatized women were frantic, trying to find out what had happened to their husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers. They waited and waited. Adding to their distress were accounts that the bodies of their loved ones- killed in ambushes in the woods-had been left on the ground and were being devoured by wild animals.

David Rohde, a journalist with the Christian Science Monitor, was the first outsider to the gruesome scene. He saw a human femur surrounded by bits of tattered fabric jutting out a rich brown mound of earth. In a nearby abandoned building, bullet holes pocked the walls, and dried bloodstains and feces were smeared on the floor and wall. The scene fit the descriptions of several escapees, who told of being crammed shoulder-to-shoulder into rooms, unable to move. The few survivors described people becoming psychotic and others committing suicide rather than share the fate of those they saw tortured.

The war is over, but Bosnia still struggles to establish true democracy. The government established after the war was deeply flawed. Equally troubling, in that tiny country the worst indicted war criminals have not been apprehended and brought to justice.

Ten years have passed since that terrible night in Srebrenica, but the pain is still very real. Kada has spent many hours with me, telling her story: "I wake up often in the night. My first thought is of my son. And then I remember...and don't get back to sleep for hours. When sleep finally closes my eyes, it's brief. In the morning I wake again, sit and have my coffee and drink it alone. I have a cigarette and then remember that my son used to smoke. When he smoked he made circles. I remember that and then cry. I wipe my tears in my loneliness."

Not long ago, Kada and I traveled to Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, where masterminds planned the war that killed so many. Kada and several other women were sharing their experiences at a meeting above a bookstore. Looking around the crowded room, she said to the Serbs, who had only a few years before been deadly enemies, "I don't want what happened to me to happen to any of you."

The next day, as we parted ways, she said quietly to me, "Seeing the tears on their faces as I told my story, I realize that I can work with these people. We can't change the past. Let's just move forward."

It's interesting, as we reflect on Independence Day, to think how our long-time enemy-the British-became our long-time friend. I'm sure there's a lesson in there that's about far more than foreign policy.

It's a lesson about the power of reconciliation. The power of forgiveness. I guess that's the meaning of real independence.