

Truth Telling and Reconciliation in Srebrenica

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Since lecturing as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Sarajevo in 2001, I have returned to Bosnia on a number of occasions. This trip, like all the rest, had a professional focus. However, my journeys have become increasingly personal, perhaps intimate, over the years. But this visit was to be different because I finally decided to act on a "deeply felt need" to visit Srebrenica and the cemetery and memorial at Potocari. Of course, my scholarly interest in Bosnia's difficult past and rocky present indicated to me

that I should visit those places in eastern Bosnia. More importantly, however, was this felt need to "see, smell, hear, and touch" an area that became the "crucible of genocide" for so many people—for the more than 8000 people who lost their

lives; the survivors and their families and friends whose lives were torn apart; and the perpetrators of the inhumanity, as well as their collaborators and sympathizers. They all lived it, with some continuing to live its aftermath. Just as the pleasant experiences that I have had while living in Bosnia were woven into the tapestry of my lived world, so too the experiences of those who survived were woven into their tapestries, except that their tapestries are stained red with blood. This was made clear to me in August of 2008 when I covered the Sarajevo Film Festival for my department's religion and film journal. The particular event that touched me was the world premiere of "Sky Too High, Soil Too Hard" (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 73 minutes), which was directed by Rudi Uran. It was a film that slowly drew in the viewer, including me, by the moving testimony of four young people who were survivors of the Srebrenica genocide. Their testimony brought to life the personal tragedy that each endures to this day, and that some of them now feel less optimistic about their future and the future of Bosnia. Perhaps this film was what finally moved me to visit Srebrenica and Potocari. I do not know, but I do know that I had a felt need to go, not only because my friends were so tragically touched by those dark days, but also because I am a human being like them. By making the visit, I proclaimed the truth of what had happened thus telling the victims and the perpetrators that the world regards genocide as a crime of the most despicable kind. This would, in turn,

contribute to feelings of security on the part of the survivors. At the same time I wanted to acknowledge the pain and suffering that the Muslim population endured, a way of showing empathy and caring towards them and thus contributing to the healing process. So I set out by bus early one Sunday morning in July making my way eastward from Sarajevo to Srebrenica.



The Road to Reconciliation

After four hours of sitting, I stepped off the bus and made my way through the streets of Srebrenica. At first glance, it looks like

many other small towns in Bosnia. There is an Orthodox church perched high on a hill, a mosque being reconstructed down below, and plenty of buildings that show signs of the devastation. The physical appearance of any multiethnic town in Bosnia is one indicator of where its people are in terms of building a common future. Looking at its buildings over a decade after the fighting ended, one might think that the people of Srebrenica are not very far along on the road to reconciliation. Of course, one could beg to differ and point to the new and renovated buildings as evidence of "togetherness." Unfortunately, believing this does not make it so, for reconstruction is often promoted and financed by outside institutions regardless of whether there is consensus about the projects within the constituent communities. So the rebuilding may be less of an expression of the hearts and minds of the town's people as a whole in working towards an improved common future than it is a vision held by outsiders in moving those people towards such a future. With that in mind, I decided to search for the most fashionable café in town, the imposing Kafe Bar Davidoff. I took a seat under its umbrella to sip a coffee, but more importantly to ask for directions to the cemetery and memorial in the hope of uncovering the attitudes of some of the locals. My waitress said she knew some English, so I proceeded to ask her. I had no doubt that she understood what I had asked her. Her response, while wearing a sheepish grin, was quick. "There is no place

like that here," she said. "Ništa!" With that said, she walked away and proceeded to murmur something to the men at the table behind me, which provoked a great deal of laughter on their part. Perhaps it was all a teenage-like prank. That would be the most charitable rendering of the incident. Even so, a certain attitude seemed to have been conveyed through her word and deed; one in which the offense against the Muslim population is taken as trivial or worse, as an event that never took place. Either way, the message was clear: I wasted my day traveling to Srebrenica and that I should return to Sarajevo. Having heard this unwelcome but informative response, I looked for a taxi driver. Even if many of the drivers of Srebrenica were harboring the same attitude as the waitress, their economic livelihood would greatly depend on shuttling people back and forth to Potocari. A passerby and a driver were quite helpful in getting me to the cemetery and memorial.

The cemetery/memorial is not a large place. What few trees there are—a smattering of Sycamore, Birch, and Chestnut—offer the visitor little shade. The trees are no doubt as young as the youngest of those who have been laid to rest. And on that day, any shade would have been a relief from the intense sunlight and heat. Despite the extreme conditions that afternoon, the experience of walking past the rows and rows of white stone and green wooden markers was a touching one. It is one thing to see the figure "8372..." on the stone near the entrance and another to see a field of markers, each indicating the site of an individual's grave, and the memorial engraved with the thousands of names of those who died in the genocide. I made my way through the parcels of gravesites, eventually arriving at the memorial an hour later. I moved along the stone slabs, each with their etched names arranged in alphabetical order, from A to Z and back again, looking for surnames of my friends. I found many: Ademovic, Babic, Harbas, Salihovic. . . . Some surnames had many individuals listed, but some had far fewer: Salihovic 229; Suljic 139; Ademovic 99; Tihic 27; Velic 16; and Lošic and Đulakovic 1. So many names; too many names. Unfortunately, there will be more names, for there are many victims whose remains have yet to be discovered and identified.

The abstractness of 8372... is humanized as one's eyes find their mark on the rows of markers and on the long list of victim names.

The cemetery and its memorial remind us that the deaths of thousands in the genocide were part of a human reality. Large segments of the male population were extinguished: children lost fathers and grandfathers; wives lost husbands, and mothers lost their sons. Boys who would one day have become fathers themselves had their lives cut short. That number was made human by the waitress and the young men under the umbrella

as well, with their attempt to obliterate historicity—that is, to make the bodies and their graves, and the recollections of the events that led to this tragedy unnoticeable. But there was more. Three weeks later I found myself in a café in Sarajevo. I was having coffee with a post-graduate student, and she challenged my optimism about Bosnia's future. I was a little startled and annoyed, for naïveté was the message that rang loud in her voice. She was not going to make it easy for me, for it turned out that she knew something I did not: she wanted to know how I could remain optimistic in the face of what had occurred during the most recent burial. I felt stupid. I did not know of the event, and thus had no response. How could I remain so upbeat about Bosnia when a number of Serbs in Srebrenica and Bratunac carried out their own "counter" event, complete with demonstrators wearing photos of Mladic attached to their chests? Before learning about this event, I had to contend only with the waitress and her cohorts. The attitude exhibited by them involved an attempt to deny part of historical reality. But the genocide did take place and its condemnation was made real in the form of the cemetery and memorial; so I thought the worst that the naysayers could do was to take the fact of the Bosnian genocide and confine it to the domain of history, thereby making it something that could eventually be forgotten, especially if people were not led to an expanse of white and green grave markers and the fateful "8372..." etched in stone that were permanent reminders that "Srebrenica was [once] one of the most desperate places on earth," as Peter Maass so accurately wrote in *Love Thy Neighbor*. I also thought if only this cadre of nationalists would visit Potocari to see for themselves how the past has been kept alive, they might come to realize the tragedy and recognize the need for dialogue about the genocide, as well as how it is clearly fitting that these reminders exist. But I myself failed to measure up to the truth, as Nebojša Šavija-Valha, program-project development manager for Nansen Dialogue Centre (NDC) Sarajevo so astutely reminded



me, for "ethnic belonging determines all aspects of life: politics, culture, economy, everyday life. The two communities, Bosniaks and Serbs, live to a large extent in parallel realities. Interethnic communication rarely exists, and then only for pragmatic reasons." One might say that I went considerably far in dwelling on the Davidoff Affair in order to reduce the nationalist threat to one that seeks only to delete realities of the past.

What I lost sight of was the reification of this threat as a lived reality in the present, kept alive by the xenophobia and chauvinism that stretch deep into the hearts of nationalists. It was never simply a matter of forgetting the genocide in its entirety, but rather a deletion of just one side of the narrative so as to punish the victims further, as well as a resurrection of another side of the genocidal narrative in order to give legitimacy to the victimizers. And so, becoming better informed led me to believe one thing: the city is a labyrinth of hatred; behind the facade of a rebuilt mosque, freshly painted houses, and the cemetery and memorial lies a grim reminder that all is not well in Srebrenica and elsewhere. Even at the best of times, I suspect that the few Muslims left behind, perhaps with no place else to go, rarely feel secure while living in a broken and violated city. Yet in spite of the constant angst, they have managed to avoid capitulation or worse, their own violent death.

Success Is Difficult to Gauge

Šavija-Valha made it clear that there were growing signs of progress amidst the continued turmoil. NDC Sarajevo has been working in Srebrenica and Bratunac since 2006. Instead of carrying out reconciliation projects, Šavija-Valha noted that NDC has simply "offered open 'space' for dialogue to take place, where people from those communities could discuss interethnic issues that burden their communities." The dialogue process was, of course, more complicated. According to Šavija-Valha, it meant "bringing people together from different ethnic groups, providing (technical) training, and facilitating interethnic dialogue on concrete issues." Thus, the key to resolving concrete issues in the ethnically divided communities was to make permanent interethnic communication that would "encourage the restructuring of social networks, to transform mono-ethnic networks into multiethnic social networks." But the process was set up to be as holistic as possible, so three "target groups" were selected:

municipalities' structures, ethnically divided schools, and youth. Although success is difficult to gauge, there have been some positive results: municipality coordination boards were formed that eventually lead to an independent Srebrenica and Bratunac Dialogue Centre; parents from both communities engaged in joint projects; and the youth from each community joined youth NGOs that were previously monoethnic. Although what Nansen has done is to offer open space to the different communities, some would argue that there can be no real success until reconciliation is achieved. What is reconciliation? It is the acceptance of one another and the development of mutual trust, which in turn is dependent on truth telling and forgiveness. Because all this is predicated on the parties coming (or being brought) into contact with one another, the social dynamics found in places like Srebrenica and Bratunac have played into the hands of the dominant ideological group, which in this case are the Serb nationalists. Interaction and thus, reconciliation, is impeded because group polarization and enclave deliberation have led to more extreme views that reflect certain deep-seated tendencies. Since those tendencies include deep-seated xenophobia and chauvinism, the kind of constructive interaction needed for reconciliation will be extremely difficult to achieve.

It is these negative processes that are precisely what the work of the Nansen Dialogue Centre tries to combat. It is through opening a space for the Serb to hear the competing Bosniak view that extremism or fanaticism on the part of the majority can be reduced. Thus, creating open space is one-step towards reconciliation, for it is hoped that over time a threshold will be reached such that the dominant group will embrace tendencies that are more conducive for dialogue and, thus, the precursors of reconciliation. It will never be easy and trouble free to deal with the likes of those at Kafé Bar Davidoff. Indeed, they may never stray from their xenophobic and chauvinist tendencies. The fact that the way people look at the world leads to changes in the world helps to perpetuate these damaging tendencies. However, this same connection between thought and change also allows for the possibility of progressive change like that resulting from an open space for dialogue, and this is ultimately what provides hope for those who want to create a better Bosnia. Integration accommodative of difference will eventually take hold, and when it does, the precursors of reconciliation, and thus reconciliation itself, will become a reality. Confidence runs high that the hopeful realist or the reluctant pessimist will see the day when there is a peaceful and prosperous multiethnic society in Bosnia.