**Commemoration**

**Srebrenica: Learning from Australian-Bosnian Students**

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**Abstract**

To coincide with the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, Victoria University and the Bosnian-Herzegovinian community in Australia organised a Study Tour to Bosnia for Bosnian-Australian university students. To varying degrees all of the students had been affected by the genocide, which continues to shape the reality of life for many. Coming to terms with that reality will be negotiated differently and over different timeframes depending on the individual and the circumstances. But within the mutually supportive environment that the study tour offered it was anticipated that the burden of the individual negotiations would be eased and made tolerable. For non-Bosnians such as myself, the study tour and participation in the Srebrenica commemoration
was an opportunity both to express solidarity with the victims of the genocide and to provide the students with a learning framework grounded in their experience of reality. As a historian I have a particular interest in how the selective operation of memory, especially shared group memory, structures reality, which—if it is to be a life-affirming experience—has to be approached reflexively. In this way lessons from the past also provide hope for the future. The following paper is based on a presentation to the Genocide Against Bosniaks of UN Safe Area Srebrenica in July 1995 – Lessons for Future Generations conference in Poticari and Sarajevo, July 2005.

In May this year, an unlicenced drunken driver crashed through a brick wall at an outer-suburban primary school in Melbourne. He ran down six children. Eleven-year-old Medina Hubanic had both her legs broken. It could have been much worse: one six-year-old boy had to have his foot amputated. Surgery to insert metal rods into Medina’s broken legs and the prospect of at least six months intensive treatment has put on hold her two passions in life: dancing and netball. The accident did more than interrupt Medina’s passions and her parents’ aspirations for their daughter. It also shattered the peace that Medina and her father and mother had worked at building around themselves since fleeing war-torn Bosnia and settling in Australia in 1997. In the words of Medina’s father Mirsad Hubanic (as reported in the Age newspaper, 22 May 2005): ‘To come to that crash scene after living through Bosnia … to me it was as if a grenade had hit before my eyes again, like there had been a massacre’.

I begin with this episode because it makes two points relevant to what I want to say in relation to the twenty-two Bosnian-background students taking part in the study tour Victoria University and the Australian Council of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Organizations organised to coincide with the commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide. The first is the determination of Bosnian refugee settlers to move on, particularly through encouraging their children to work hard and to succeed in their new homeland. The second is that no amount of hard work and success can—or should—overturn the reality that the bitter legacy of terrible events like Srebrenica is ever-present, ready to reduce to chaos the order and meaning with which people like Mirsad surround themselves.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is well-documented among Bosnian refugees in Australia. Until recently, the largest group being counselled by the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture were Bosnians: concentration camp survivors, Srebrenica survivors, raped women.1 Every anniversary, like the tenth anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, brings back the memories, rekindles the traumas. Natural disasters, like the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, or accidents like that which affected Medina, can also re-trigger the pain and despair that may have lain dormant for years, turning order into chaos.

Like Mirsad Hubanic, the students who took part in the study tour are accustomed to dealing with pain, are familiar with the effort required to keep chaos and anomie at bay. They have had to become adept at maintaining order and meaning, not only for themselves but also in some cases for the mother who
has lost her husband in the horror of Srebrenica or the brother or sister suffering post-traumatic stress disorder.

Their participation in the tenth anniversary commemoration at Srebrenica was a key component of the study tour—though in the context of Srebrenica and all it represents, the term ‘study tour’ is hopelessly inadequate. Nearly all of the students came to Australia as refugees, some from Srebrenica and the surrounding area. Many have lost family. All are dedicated and highly motivated students, but they continue to be weighed down by the enormity of the crimes, the genocide, committed in Srebrenica. One of the ways of easing the weight of the burden was by joining the students’ individual stories to the collective Bosnian narrative. This was one of the desired outcomes of the study tour: to provide a mutually supportive setting, a ‘safe space’, within which individual stories—the individual textual threads of the collective narrative—could find expression, could be validated, could be honoured. Part of that role was enacted at the *Genocide Against Bosniaks of UN Safe Area Srebrenica in July 1995* conference, which provided a time and a space to validate and honour their stories.

Playing this role—helping to make an opportunity for the students to confront and deal with their painful experience and their memories of Srebrenica—cannot be an excuse to do nothing else. It would be morally reprehensible if academics like me were to withdraw into our own ‘safe space’ by claiming that because we are doing something positive for the victims, others can take care of the bigger political and legal issues. We are citizens as well as sympathetic individuals, and as citizens we are obliged to work for the appropriate political and legal responses to the crimes that were committed against humanity in Srebrenica.

Not to accept this obligation would be a version of ‘Not to decide is to decide’. Not to engage as citizens would be to undermine any claim we might have to be individuals working with and for our students. Providing a safe place in which students can confront and deal with Srebrenica has to entail engagement and solidarity with *their* struggles to move beyond the horror and the pain and the meaninglessness of Srebrenica—and as the students themselves have expressed it, central to moving on is the need to hold the criminals of Srebrenica accountable for their crimes.²

The individual stories of the students are part of the lessons for future generations that the conference hoped to draw. Respecting their stories by enabling them to be articulated, by listening to them, by acting upon them, is part of the hope for the future. Coalescing out of and informing their individual stories are the multi-layered collective stories. These also need to be articulated, listened to and acted upon. At both levels, individual and collective, acting upon the stories entails holding the criminals of Srebrenica accountable for their crimes. But, before this, acting upon them also entails listening to the stories, at the individual as well as the collective level—because the horror and pain of the individual histories and memories articulated in those stories are part of the crimes that have been committed and, at the experiential level, continue to be committed. The telling of any story, like the memories it recalls, always occurs
in a context. Given this, it is important that we work together to ensure that the context is one that enables the person telling the story to move forward.

One such context for the stories that follow was the study tour, which aimed to provide a supportive environment and a positive program to build on the students’ hopes and aspirations for the future of Bosnia. In the midst of finishing final essays and assignments and preparing for end of semester exams, the students were asked to make time to reflect on the significance of Srebrenica and of their attending the tenth anniversary commemoration, in preparation for what they would confront. What follows are their stories, told in their words.

Mirsada: Living through, simply call it hell, has had an enormous impact on me personally … It was very difficult to continue life in a normal routine after this catastrophe, but a human body can adjust to anything and everything. The loss of loved ones and property where you began your happy childhood is certainly not easily forgotten. The trauma that follows and haunts you after is less likely to be avoided because it’s inevitable. Srebrenica will always be my city, where once blood flooded the earth. I am more than happy to be part of the commemoration of the tragedy of Srebrenica ten years later, even though this will probably require a lot of strength and courage to participate in such a vital event—not only for Bosnia’s population, but for the whole world who are conscious and aware of humanity and the worth of one’s life. It will definitely bring back the terrible memories, and awake the unbearable pain, but it is my privilege to attend … My soul is unable to endure such unfairness in the world. I am outraged to see that the responsible ones have not yet been captured while the victims live on not even knowing where the bones lay and where blood spurted of their most precious and loved ones …

Sena: Whenever I think of Srebrenica it associates me with massacre—a massacre that became a genocide towards Bosniak people. It associates me with horrible days that happened in July 1995, when people were executed by Bosnian-Serb soldiers. It does not bring happy memories but memories of how the Bosnian-Serb soldiers killed women and children, and most certainly killed the majority of the adult male population. It upsets me even more when I think that these brutal killings were not committed in a battle, but they were committed against people who were unarmed and helpless and who had been repeatedly assured by the killers—Bosnian Serb soldiers—and from the UN peacekeeping forces whose mission was to protect them, that they would not be harmed if they surrendered. It also upsets me why nobody did anything to stop them … This is what Srebrenica means to me.

Amela: I have to admit that talking about Srebrenica is not the easiest thing to do. It brings up a lot of sadness and distress but also resentment and anger. Sometimes it is just easier to put [it] in the back of your head and even though it is there it is just not something you have to try and explain away to yourself. Because that way you can just feel compassion for the people who died and for their loved ones. But it is inevitable that we start thinking about the ‘why’. And who to blame …

It is true that Srebrenica is a crime against humanity. But so many people didn’t have to die. [The] Srebrenica massacre didn’t just happen. The world
let it happen. The reason there were so many Bosnian Muslims there was that it was a UN protected area. A ‘safe haven’! Unarmed civilians trusting the protection of the international community, lulled into false security, primed for slaughter. You cannot promise civilians protection, fail them and then just say that it is not your fault …

Going back after ten years is going to be emotional for me. But the day will be about remembrance. It will be a day to honour those who died. Life has certainly moved on but Srebrenica is there to remind us all not to let it happen again. Hopefully the international community got the message but sometimes I really doubt it.

**Damir** [who prefaced his comments with an extract from Francis Boyle, Attorney for the Mothers of Srebrenica and Podrinje, pointing out that the student association Nomokanon celebrated ‘Srebrenica’s freedom’ at Belgrade University’s law faculty on 17 May with an event titled ‘Srebrenica: Ten Years After Liberation’, at which professors and former generals denounced the massacre as ‘Western lies’ and ‘Muslim fabrications’]: The question is not what could have been done to prevent this but rather why wasn’t anything done … It’s easy these days to point fingers at others and to turn around saying ‘wasn’t me’, but that attitude will get us nowhere. Innocent people paid with their lives so that individuals could build their political future. Ten years after this event some people are still arguing that it was the right thing to do or that Srebrenica never happened, [and] the question here is: how can the world listen to those people when everyone knows what really happened? I sometimes wonder what kind of people we are dealing with here. Sometimes I wonder if there is such a thing as peace, and if there is peace why did we pay [for] it with 7,000+ male Muslim population from Srebrenica?

Ten years after, a group of students from Australia is going to visit Srebrenica and I’ll be taking part in it as well. I’m not sure what my feeling is when I think about this visit, but I do know that people who could have prevented this will be there as well, thinking ten years have passed and we haven’t done anything about it. People who committed crimes in Srebrenica are still running their politics as free people.

**Edin**: I remember hiding out in a small and smoky bomb shelter in Travnik during the four terrible days in July 1995, when an estimated 8,000 people were executed by Serb soldiers who had overrun the United Nations designated safe area of Srebrenica. The invaders killed women and children, and they almost certainly killed the majority of the adult male population of the so-called safe area. These brutal killings were not committed in battle. They were committed against people who were unarmed and helpless and who had been repeatedly assured that they would not be harmed if they surrendered …

For me personally, Srebrenica serves as a reminder not to forgive, not to forget the genocide that was done to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Admir**: I was born on 26 March 1978 in Srebrenica. I lived in Srebrenica until 14 April 1992 (I was 14 at that time), which is the last day I have seen my city.
To Australia I came with my mother and younger sister in August 1998. From 1992 to 1998 I was about two months in Slovenia and after that I lived in Berlin. Most of my family was in Srebrenica during the war, including my father, grandparents, two uncles, cousins and many more.

Srebrenica is the place where I spent most of my childhood. It brings the most beautiful memories, of times when I was together with my family on birthdays, BBQs, holidays and all the other times we spent together. It brings memories of my friends and school friends as we went to school together, played together different sports, went on sports competitions and so on. I can clearly say that [the] best time of my life I spent in Srebrenica … Unfortunately, since 1992 everything has changed. After that came the problems and the worries about all the family members, especially about my father. At the beginning of the war we were unclear about my father for more than two months—if he was alive or dead. Since the tragedy in July 1995 my whole life changed. Most of my family is either dead or missing since July 1995 … In July that year, I had experienced happiness and sadness at the same time, when we found out that my uncle had escaped this massacre, but no news about my father, nor two of my cousins, my grandfather and many relatives. Another reason to participate in the study tour is to give blood for identification of the missing persons, and hopefully I will be able to find out what happened to my father. To assure that this will never happen again we need to serve justice and get the people responsible for mass killings before trial—and try to find out how strong their hatred was, if they were able to do all those horrific killings.

To summarize it, I can say that [the] name Srebrenica brings the most beautiful feelings to me and on the other hand the most horrible feelings. I always ask myself two questions:

‘Why did those people do all those horrible things?
How is a man able to commit mass killings?’

Finally Mido [who the day before writing the following comments had viewed the now-familiar video footage of Serb paramilitary soldiers executing six Bosnian Muslim men, one of whom—a man in a pale blue shirt—he recognised as his father, missing since 1995]: In [the] last twenty-four hours, a lot has changed with my view of Srebrenica Massacre and my whole perception of it …

After seeing that horrible footage I hardly can feel my legs, I avoid driving because I can’t focus on anything but that one familiar image from that footage.

I am a man, I have been since ‘95 [when he was only thirteen]; I’ve started enjoying my life but I didn’t want to see that footage …

There is a lot of anger there, disgust and somehow desire to live even more fully; to go to the gym with more passion, to act with more passion, to write, improve, do.
I want to work hard, try to get my film off the ground, do as many things as I can to satisfy my desire to live a meaningful life.

Sometimes though, as I do now, I want to cry … I’ve gotten over that man in the blue shirt whose silhouette I kind of recognised in the footage, but man … Hey, it is hard to believe … you know … That man held my hand, liked to have a beer or two on the holidays, he believed in people more than he did in God, took me hunting … What can I tell you?

Who could believe, he seemed so powerless, broken, lonely … My dad, man.

I loved that guy. Endlessly, as you do … and I was even on my spiritual journey of forgiving them, but then I saw that …

These are samples of the students’ stories. Each student’s story is powerful and poignant. Each is testimony to continuing pain and bewilderment. Each demands to be listened to and respected.

The stories confirm a point made by many respected commentators: that laying the foundations for a Bosnia and Herzegovina that respects and promotes human rights for all of its citizens without distinction requires acknowledging the genocide, confronting its causes, and ensuring that those responsible are held accountable. I would add, accountable not only for crimes committed in Bosnia up to 1995, but also for the violence and pain that continues in places like Australia up to the present. The violence and pain that the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture seeks to ameliorate. The violence and pain suffered by Bosnian-Australian football followers who tuned into the Banja Luka-Sarajevo match earlier this year to be confronted by the spectacle of the crowd chanting ‘NOŽ-ŽICA-SREBRENICA’. The violence and pain endured by the students Admir and Mido in the loss of their fathers. This violence and pain also demands accountability.

As speakers canvassed at the Genocide Against Bosniaks of UN Safe Area Srebrenica conference, accountability can take different forms: national and international criminal court proceedings; a global truth and reconciliation forum; publishing the truth; ensuring honesty in how our educational systems represent the crimes; appropriately marking the scenes of crimes. Whatever the forms, the clear message from the students is that, without accountability, acknowledging the genocide and confronting its causes can only be, at best, half-hearted, or worse, an act of bad faith.

I use the phrase ‘act of bad faith’ very deliberately, because I think it is impossible to read the students’ stories without being moved and ashamed by the betrayal of Bosnian Muslims by the world community. Reading between the lines, there is the sense of profound disappointment that by sitting on their hands the rest of the world conspired with the Srebrenica criminals. The (as far as I am aware) lack of international condemnation of the continuing acts of vilification and denigration implicit in the Belgrade law students’ ‘Srebrenica’s freedom’ farce, or to the football crowd’s taunt of ‘NOŽ-ŽICA-SREBRENICA’, can only serve to heighten the sense of betrayal. Dealing with these acts of violence requires more than the arrest and trial of war criminals. As the conference, like the students’ stories, reminded us, the genocide occurred in a UN safe area,
repeating what had happened the year before in Rwanda, where the genocide of around 800,000 Tutsis occurred under the watch of the UN Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR).\textsuperscript{4} As the students imply, the culpability of the international community in not responding to the crises, in not acknowledging that genocide was occurring, in not, even now, seriously engaging with how to prevent such crimes against humanity from occurring again, will not be addressed by dealing only with the frontline criminals.

Within Serbia—where until recently it has been reported that a majority of the population still believe that the Srebrenica massacre never happened, that it is a Bosnian-Muslim fabrication—exposing and countering the lies requires systematic and comprehensive state intervention, particularly in relation to the media and educational institutions. But it is not just against rogue professors at Belgrade University that intervention is called for. As a professor at an Australian university that prides itself on its multiculturalism and commitment to social justice, I have to seriously question the extent to which institutions such as mine are not only preparing our students for a meaningful career but also providing them with the capacity to recognise and experience the responsibilities of global citizenship. I have to question how—as Australian universities compete against each other to score well in the job destination surveys to churn out thousands of business and IT graduates each year—we ensure that such timeless questions as ‘What is true?’ , ‘What is good?’ and ‘How ought we to live?’ inform what we pass on as knowledge.

Within Bosnia and Herzegovina, people like Jakob Finci have made a strong case for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to parallel the criminal proceedings in The Hague. Finci sees the Commission as an opportunity for the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as he puts it, to ‘preserve our own memory … from oblivion’, before it is lost and appropriated into the memoirs of outsiders like Karl Bildt, Lord Owen or Richard Holbrook.\textsuperscript{5} He envisages between 5,000 and 7,000 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina ‘who stayed there during … the period November 1990 to December 1995’ appearing before the Commission to tell their story. I don’t know whether Finci’s intention was to privilege those who stayed, but I think it is important that in moving towards a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the stories of those who sought refuge outside the country not be overlooked. Their stories \textit{are} part of the collective narrative, offering different but equally valid accounts of the experience of war and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Those who sought refuge in Australia confront the pressure to ‘get on with life’; to spare others the ordeal of sharing in their pain and grief by repressing memories. The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture deals on a daily basis with the consequences of such repression; much of their work is directed to encouraging people to disclose and share their grief. As Hariz Halilovich—a good friend and former counsellor at the Foundation—has pointed out to me, the result is nothing like ‘closure’ (carrying its own connotations of repression), but the opportunity to move on, to achieve a resolution of sorts. Ironically, the opportunity is perhaps greater in Bosnia: its monuments, events and exhibitions materialize the grief and provide a collective framework that encourages the recognition of the pain in others and the realisation that you are not alone. In
the absence of such a framework in Australia, the need for the students to have their individual stories conjoin with the collective narrative becomes all the more critical.

Finding peace and refuge in a place like Australia can present its own burdens. Three days after seeing the tape in which he recognised his father being tortured and killed, Mido reflected on leaving Bosnia in 1998:

You leave everything: your land, your history, people with the same genes as you ... your blood relatives. You leave everything that you used to be and go in search of something you had been missing before. It’s usually the peace of silence that lasts longer than the one in between two bombshell explosions ...

Then with time, in that newly found peaceful silence, you start to think of all those people you left behind, all the memories, days and nights. You start to think of your childhood home and the boys and girls you went to primary school with. You start to think of how those boys would eventually become very good friends of yours and those girls would become beautiful women ... You start to imagine what your life there would be, if you had the time to grow up and live in your hometown and on the land of your ancestors ...

What comes out in Mido’s reflection is the interdependence of memory (of all those childhood friends you’d left behind) and imagination (of what your life might have been, if only …) It is an interdependence that isn’t fixed, but context-specific—in his case the context of seeing his father on the tape after a decade of uncertainty. The implicit reflexivity in Mido’s words—his awareness that the context affects what it is he remembers, what it is he recalls—makes the point that memories are not simple records of the past, but interpretive reconstructions.

As Antze and Lambek have argued in Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory (1996), reconstructions such as these bear the imprint of local narrative conventions, cultural assumptions, discursive formations and practices, and the social contexts of recall and commemoration, from none of which even the most ostensibly private memories are immune. This has implications for the call for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to preserve the memory of the past. A Commission, after all, represents a particular discursive formation and set of practices that would mediate private, traumatic experiences in a fairly precise way. Preparation for giving testimony—the mental preparation, receiving social support (such as counselling), bringing often disjointed experiences into meaningful focus that will make sense to the audience—provides an interpretive framework for the ‘memories’. The social context leading up to an appearance at the Commission and during the testimony itself—the context of knowing that it is to be collated—makes the individual memory at the same time collective. As Antze and Lambek suggest, if the emphasis is on the therapeutic (individually and collectively), this is a positive move forward.

But to equate the memory with unmediated experience and assume that it corresponds with an ‘objective reality’ is unlikely to assist either the individual or the collectivity in moving forward. This is not to deny or downplay the horror and sheer awfulness of the experience, or the devastation suffered by individuals, families and communities, or to suggest that the criminals don’t
need to be held accountable. It is to suggest that the particular shaping of the memory allowed by mediating agencies like a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, educational institutions or memorial centres will help determine whether the experience is negative, in the sense of locking people into the tropes, metaphors and narrative practices that helped give rise to the events being remembered (such as stereotyped views of Serbs or Bosniaks), or positive, in the sense of assisting people to recognize the destructiveness of tropes, metaphors and narrative practices.

In its own way, the study tour and participation in the commemoration of Srebrenica presented us with a similar challenge and opportunity. As I have suggested, a key aim of the study tour was to provide a context that would not lock the students into destructive tropes and metaphors of the past but would enable them to use their memories as a stepping-off point for reflection and new forms of action. Some of the tropes and metaphors are there in their stories—but so too is a reflexive capacity that we aimed to encourage and develop: through the mutually supportive environment that the study tour afforded for dealing with painful memories; through site-visits to successful companies; through briefings on exciting NGO initiatives at local community level; and through the many opportunities that we had during our time together for celebrating Bosnia’s rich cultural heritage. From conversations with the students, my sense is that, to varying degrees, all of us were provided with lessons from the past but also with hope for the future.

Endnotes


2 While some of the key actors involved in the Srebrenica genocide, such as General Radislav Krstic, were found guilty by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for their roles in crime, the main perpetrators, General Ratko Mladić and his political protégé Radovan Karadžić, still remain at large ten years after the crime was committed. See ICTY website <http://www.un.org/icty/>.

3 Meanwhile this has become a common feature at any soccer game between Bosnian and Serbian clubs. ‘Nož-Žica-Srebrenica’ (Knife-Wire-Srebrenica) refers to the way many men from Srebrenica were killed (with knives) while their hands were tied behind their backs with wire.


Bibliography

