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THE NEFBIH TIMES

JULY 11, 2020 WILL MARK 25 YEARS SINCE THE GENOCIDE IN SREBRENICA. WE HONOR THE MEMORY OF MORE THAN 8,372 INOOCENT VICTIMS. 'NEW ENGLAND FRIENDS OF BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA' (NEFBIH) CORDIALLY INVITES YOU TO TAKE PART IN OUR 'ROAR FOR JUSTICE, SREBRENICA REMEBRANCE DAY" ONLINE STORY CAMPAIGN. THIS CAMPAIGN IS DEDICATEED TOWARDS RAISING AWARENESS AND PAYING TRIBUTE TO THE INNOCENT VICTIMS OF GENOCIDE.

Above are the graves of Selima's three brothers. To the left is Sadik, in the middle is Miralem, and to the right is Hasan. Right next to Hasan, in the white tombstone, is Selima's father. He was buried in 2007.

Photographed in Potocari, 2010. To the left is sister, Ramiza, Selima in the middle, her mother, being comforted by Selima's cousin. Husband, Selim to his right in white shirt.

Selima's Story

JORDAN STEVEN SHER

At 49, Selima Vejzovic, has crystal clear and haunting memories of her life at the time of the genocide in Srebrenica that led to the 10-day slaughter of 8,372 men and boys beginning July 11 in 1995. She is unafraid to tell the world of what happened understanding that unless stories like hers are told, denial by Serbians including in Serbia itself and the Republic of Serbia, and indifference by others around the globe, the rhetoric of revisionist history will overshadow the most horrific atrocities to take place in Europe since the Holocaust will be forgotten.

Until the age of 18, Selima lived with her parents, father, Selim and mother, Hatidza, and six younger siblings, sisters Ramiza, Mejra, Raza, and brothers, Sadik, Miralem, and Hasan in the small village of Podgaj next door to two other homes where extended family resided. It was a normal existence she says, one punctuated by celebrations, local gatherings, parties and close connections with others in the village. It was at those that she would meet and court her future husband, also named Selim.

She went to school until completing the eighth grade, and although she enjoyed good grades, because the high school was so far away and transportation limited, she stopped her education. The family expectation to help her mother with the younger children became her responsibility. She had no misgivings; this was her role.

When she married her husband in 1988, she moved out of her family's house to her own just down the hill. Selim had a good job in town, and in 1989 they had their first child, a girl they named Azra. Life was good for the new family. Life was safe. Life moved forward.

Then, in 1992, it all changed.

Slobodan Milosevic, president of Yugoslavia, and a Serbian himself, and Radovan Karadzic, who was the president of the newly established entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina called Republika Srpska (Republic of Serbia), determined a course that was meant to eliminate Bosnia and Herzegovina of Bosniaks (Muslims). Their campaign of "ethnic cleansing," as was termed by Milosevic, was one of terror in order to carry out their goal.

The Serbian military moved their forces near Podgaj and surrounding areas. Their goal was to force Muslims and the fewer Croats out of Bosnia and Herzegovina to make way for their goal of "a Greater Serbia." At the time, about a third of the country was inhabited by Bosnian Serbs, and the newly voted upon independence by the majority Bosniaks for independence from Yugoslavia did not sit well with the Serbs.

Despite the fact that Serbs, Croats, and Muslims co-existed peacefully previously, hate was being flamed by radical Bosnian Serbs, and Serbia itself.

One morning in early May, word got out that the local Bosniaks must report to their jobs to collect their final paycheck; they would no longer be employed. Selim successfully managed to get his check and return home to tell Selima. Some others were not as fortunate as the ruse to lure Bosniaks, especially the men, allowed the Serbs to capture and take prisoners away to whatever fate the Serbs had devised.

The sounds of artillery and gunfire were now echoing throughout the hills. Tension filled all of the villagers' lives.

An unsettled existence became their new normal. Their lives were beginning to teeter on a new precarious precipice.

Genocide in Srebrenica

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By late May, the Serb army entered their village and they all had to flee. The village was burned down and they went to nearby Opetci in the Srebrenica territory to live. They had little more than some clothing and the limited food they could carry.

"In our new home, which was my mother's cousins, with all eleven of us living in one room on the second floor, we often heard gunfire, tank shells and hand grenade explosions nearby. It was very frightening and we were all worried, especially for the kids," Selima explained.

For the next three months along with others in the town, they slept in the woods to avoid being seen by the Serbian soldiers. They took blankets and tarps, and returned to their home during the day to gather food and water.

"At the time, all we could think about was survival. Of course, sleeping in the woods was difficult, but we felt we had no choice," said Selima.

"For food, my parents had a small farm in Podgaj, where we would get fresh vegetables. The adults would sneak out in the early morning under the cover of darkness to pick the potatoes, corn, and beans while the younger teens took care of Azra. We were so scared. I was terrified. Not everyone was so lucky to have a farm, so we would bring some of the produce to my relatives and some others, including to my in-laws, who needed help."

Having very little in the way of an organized military, Bosnia was not prepared to adequately repel the Serb army and paramilitary. But in late July, a ragtag Bosnian military took some control and Selima and family could at least sleep indoors once again. They spent a total of eight months in that house with bombs and bullets replacing the singing and chirping sounds of the spring and summer birds.

One summer afternoon in 1992, Selima was among twenty family members visiting her uncle's house for a gathering. After all, having

Selima by her brothers' graves.

barely a modicum of normalcy, any opportunity to be with family was celebrated. Amidst the hushed revelry, a missile from a tank exploded on the house.

"The smoke and debris were all around us. Shattered glass was scattered throughout the house. I couldn't hear from the blast. I can't even explain what it was like to be in the midst of that. My husband and daughter were there, too. We survived, but not my poor cousin, who was outside and was killed, and his father, my uncle, was wounded."

"It was February, 1993 and at that time, the UN started to drop pallets of food for those of us in that area, so we would retrieve what we could carry. We didn't fear the Serb army because the Bosnian army was present, and besides, the pallets were deep into the woods and the soldiers were not going to go there."

They also collected roots, leaves, and other plants to make flour for bread. Selima speaks of how anxious everyone was. There was no joy to be had. It was a desperate time.

A humanitarian crisis began to unfold. It was cold and there was a lot of snow in March, 1993. People were living outside and many died from exposure. Word was getting around that the UN was dropping off food in Srebrenica city, but also taking people to a "free zone" in Tuzla. However, these convoys were not taking the men or teenage boys because the Serbs claimed that they could be potential soldiers fighting against them.

Selim urged Selima to take Azra to get to Tuzla. Selim's sister and her two children had gone earlier. Selima's father walked Selima and Azra 30 kilometers to Srebrenica City to see if Selima could catch a UN truck to Tuzla. She took a chance that she could find passage away from the encroaching Serbian army. Leaving her husband was excruciatingly painful, but they both had hope that they would be reunited.

"We always had hope," she said. "Nothing was sure. I was hoping to find safety in Tuzla, but truly didn't know what we would encounter. My father came with me and carried Azra most of the way. We took some short cuts, and traversed the main road when the snow made our trek too difficult. My dad walked in front of me to pave a path through the snow. It was below freezing. I remember bundling Azra in a pink puffy coat, scarf, boots and mittens. I had on a warm coat that my husband had bought me in happier times. My father was so brave, and so giving. He and I were very close. I believe that I have his attributes of kindness and generosity. That is part of the legacy he left me. In any event, he led us to what would eventually be our salvation; the safety we were seeking."

They arrived at night, and could hear helicopters dropping pallets of food nearby. Her father and sister-in-law went to get some food while Selima slept at a friend's house.

"At 1:00 a.m. my dad woke me and told me to get on the trucks that were leaving for Tuzla. I couldn't believe my eyes. There seemed like thousands of mostly women and girls waiting to get onto a truck, so I felt lucky to get in one. I brought my few belongings along with me and

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hugged my dad goodbye. At the time, I could not have predicted it would be the last time I would see him, or hear his warm and loving voice. I miss him more than my words will ever convey."

Selima and Azra, along with one of her husband's sisters and her two children, went to Tuzla 100 kilometers away on the same day, but on different trucks.

"The truck we were on was so packed. It was actually hard to breathe and I was so frightened for Azra. I laid her on the small suitcase at my feet bending forward to make sure people did not step on her. People died along the way maybe from the lack of oxygen, I don't know, but it was a very hard trip."

Upon arrival they slept in a dorm-like structure with many others. There was no electricity for the hundreds in that shelter. For Selim and the others, it was eerie and disturbing being uprooted from their homes to be in this vacuous building barely being able to see. She was quite worried that this was to be her new home?

The next day, however, Selima and her daughter were transported to a town called Tinja in Srebrenik, while her husband's sister went to Zivinice nearby.

Selima and Azra lived with a local Muslim family that volunteered to take them in. It was the end of March, 1993, and they had survived the cold Bosnian winter, and were now at least living with a caring family with a bed to sleep in, food to eat, running water and electricity, and the relative safety of Srebrenik.

Selima recalls a poignant story when Azra was four.

"When we lived in Opetci, we usually only had lunch and dinner so we could preserve our food. I would tell my daughter that I would hide a piece of bread for her for when she was hungry. She clearly remembered this because when we were eating dinner one evening with the family, Azra asked me if I could hide some bread in case she got hungry. The homeowner sadly looked over at my daughter and cried. And so did I."

"This family was very nice to us. But after three months we needed to find our own place. I knew a woman and her daughter from my village who happened to live next door to where we were in Srebrenik. She and I found a house for us all to live."

In Srebrenik, as in other places in much of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Muslims, Serbs, and Croats lived in the same or nearby communities. When the war started, the Serb families fled to Serbia leaving houses abandoned. Although some looting occurred, the local officials encouraged refugees like Selima to claim one of those houses. They even had running water and power. The local Red Cross provided food. However, it was typically not sufficient. Like other displaced persons Selima and her friend found local people who had farms to "work for food." The children joined them and just played while the women worked. In exchange, they got jams, dried fruits, potatoes and beans.

"We connected with good, kind people. Even the family that took us in when we first arrived helped us in this way."

This is how they lived for almost two years. During that time, she and her family, who still lived in the Srebrenica territory, mailed letters to each other facilitated by the Red Cross.

Although the letters were opened to ensure that no plans of resistance were being organized, they were able to keep up-to-date with each other's lives.

When explaining why most of her family remained behind in Opetci, Selima points out that although it was safer where she was in Srebrenik, her mother would never have left the other children. And, because the males including her father, her husband, brothers, her cousin's husband, uncle and cousins not being able to pass through Serb militarized zones, there was no way her mom would leave without them.

In fact, her family was describing a thriving Srebrenica. Life seemed normal once the UN troops from Canada arrived in 1993 to make sure that the Serb army had no access to the city and surrounding areas. There was plenty to eat, and all was calm. "Wish you were here," they'd write in their letters to her.

Her sister, Ramiza, got married three years before the war and had two daughters, Elvisa and Enisa, and gave birth to her youngest child, a boy, Haris, in 1994, in midst of the war. They all encouraged Selima to return, but traveling in Bosnia was not safe. Life was good in Srebrenica.

The Canadian peacekeepers left and a small Dutch unit took over.

Selima saw news reports that the Serbs had delivered a new offensive push and were headed for Srebrenica.

"Still, I was not so worried. After all, this was a "safe zone." The UN peacekeepers were there. How could anything happen? The people will be evacuated, I was sure."

On July 6, things took a terrible turn. The newly formed Bosnian Serb army under General Ratko Mladic, which was tasked along with the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav military, began their offensive. Ten thousand men fled through dense forests to Potocari just outside of Srebrenica where the UN Peacekeepers were stationed believing it to be safe. But there was no intervention by the peacekeepers who either surrendered or just stood by.

"It is time to take revenge on these Muslims," it was later reported that Mladic commanded.

Meanwhile, in Potocari, with false promises of freedom by Mladic's soldiers, in addition to the terror tactics of murder and rape, the Bosniak men surrendered. The horrific plan by the Bosnian Serb forces was quickly revealed, and the atrocities were unleashed.

Men and boys were put into holding sites, mostly in a football stadium in Bratunac. Others were held in sites including in Vlasenica, Nova Kasaba, Branjevo, and Kravica. All of these places were north of Srebrenica along the Drina River near the Serbian border. They were held in warehouses, factories and schools among other places, and executed. The killings began with unrelenting brutality on July 13 as the massacre now unfolded.

Several thousand women and girls were transported to the airfield in Tuzla where they were housed in tents. Many of them witnessed the men and boys being rounded up and left behind as they were bussed to the airport. Some even reported seeing the slaughter. And over the next ten days, over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were killed and dumped into mass graves.

Selima had to find the women and girls of her family at the Tuzla Airport.

"My friend and I took a bus to find my family. There were thousands of mostly women and children there, so finding anyone was very difficult. I can't even tell you the mixture of emotions I had, the desperation I felt."

She found her youngest sister, Raza, who was only fourteen at the time, and her ten-year-old boy cousin, Sejid, the only male from her father's side of the family to make it out alive.

"When I finally found my family, including my mom, we went to my house where I had cooked lots of food, and they showered. We were all trembling from what we were now becoming very aware of. The Serbs were targeting the males. The helplessness we felt cannot be described."

Since the house was not big enough for everyone, most of them went to a shelter in Zivinice. Selima wanted her mother to stay with her, but her mom was too distraught to do so.

The Bosnian army had a presence in Srebrenik, and Selima's mother wanted to stay in a shelter in town, so that she could go to the command headquarters every day to see if there was word of any men or boys who had survived.

"She cried so much," Selima told me. "There was nothing I could say or do to calm her especially because I was so upset myself." Meanwhile, there was no word on her husband either.

"On July 17, I went from Tinja with my daughter to visit my family and husband's family to sleep over in Zivinice. Early that night, the news came that the first group of men who had escaped from Srebrenica had arrived here. I was woken up from the loud voices and gunshots, almost like a celebration, because of their arrival. In that moment, I wasn't aware of who was in that group. The next morning two of my husband's nephews came to the door and called me outside to inform me that my husband was one of the men who had made it out, and that he was sleeping at his sister's house in Zivinice."

Her heart burst. Selim had made it. The hope

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SELIMA'S STORY

they had of seeing each other again was not false. She raced out of the house with Azra to reunite with her husband for the joyous reunion. He then told her what happened.

Selim had walked into Srebrenik with several other men—they had fled Srebrenica as the terror began. It took six days to reach Srebrenik as they hid in the woods and ate what little food they carried with them. Sleep was fitful and sporadic. They had to avoid any Serb soldiers, understanding that they would be killed. He carried with him sad news, too. He didn't know what happened to Selima's family, but he feared the worst.

A friend of Selima's sister, Ramiza, who was part of the Selim's group that had escaped told Ramiza of the grim news about her husband. While fleeing Srebrenica, he was shot in both legs. His wounds were too critical to allow him to make the trek with them. He courageously told the others to leave him; that he knew he would just hold them back. They had no choice but to do so. They took his backpack to give to Ramiza, so that she could have something to remember him by. With the telling of this tragedy all Selima, Ramiza and the others could do was to wring the tears out of their eyes until they could cry no more.

It was not until 2003 that Ramiza's husband's remains would eventually be identified. It would take that long to finally bring closure for her and the family.

Selim fixed up the house in Srebrenik for her mother, Hatidza to live with them where they stayed until 1996 while the others in her family remained in Zivinice.

"In Srebrenik, my mother was always sad and crying. None of us felt we could ever live a normal life again in Bosnia. We felt unsafe; always unsafe. We wanted to get out and join Selim's sister."

Before the war, Selim's younger sister and husband lived in Belgrade Serbia, where he was working, but then fled to Austria once the war began. The two then emigrated to the United States; to San Francisco. They sponsored Selima, Selim, Azra, and the soon-to-be born Fatima, whose birthplace was in San Francisco. Among her other sisters who also moved to the U.S., only Ramiza remained in Bosnia where she and her mother live in Sarajevo.

The waiting for news of survivors or victims of the massacres in Srebrenica continued for Selima and Selim in the U.S.

No one knew for sure whether their male family members had survived the massacre though it was quite clear that they did not. There were rumors that some were imprisoned in Serbia, or that others were in hiding in Bosnia. But the grim news eventually made its way into the public eye.

Tearfully, Selima explained the remorse she carries to this day.

"I never thought we would not all be reunited. My youngest brother, Hasan, was fifteen at the time I left. I didn't have him join me and Dad when we walked to Srebrenica city because I was worried that there might not be enough food for him. I figured we would be together again. The Serbs would have allowed a 15-year-old to leave at that time, but I was concerned for his well-being."

She pauses as tears well up and gently roll down her cheeks.

"If I had known I'd never see my father or brothers again, I never would have gone away. My youngest brother, the one who I didn't take with me when I left, didn't make it. He was eighteen when they murdered him. Hasan, my other two brothers, my Dad, my uncle and his two sons, my brother-in-law, and my cousin's husband were executed along with the thousands of others. I could never ever have imagined that such evil existed. How could anyone think that this would take place? It was and still is beyond my ability to understand?"

Years passed as the names of the dead slowly reached their loved ones. Survivors were given the opportunity to identify remains beginning in 2001. Selima's sister in Bosnia had DNA that matched with her father and brothers. However, the two older brothers, who were a year apart in age, were not easily identified as to which one was which. This discrepancy, which caused a delay in needed closure, pained the surviving family members.

Selima steadies herself and solemnly recites the following: "My dad, Selim, was murdered at the age of forty-five. As for my brothers:

Sadik, was murdered at the age of twenty-two.
Miralem, was murdered at the age of twenty-one.
Hasan, was murdered at that age of eighteen.
They were last seen alive on July 11, 1995."

Remains for many are still being located and identified. Between August and November of 1995, the Bosnian Serb army dug up bodies from the mass graves around the region and systematically moved them to secondary and tertiary sites in order to conceal the atrocities. Discovering those sites requires intensive research. For over a thousand of those victims and their families, peace has not yet arrived as their remains are yet to be found.

Using the DNA of Ramiza once again, the identification of the sisters' father was made in 2007. With Hatidza and Ramiza's DNA, the identities of their brothers, and uncle (her father's brother) were confirmed in 2010. For each, Selima and her family went to the Srebrenica Memorial in Bosnia to properly bury their loved ones. It is on July 11 that every family wishing to do so can bury their family member's remains at the memorial service on the sacred grounds in Srebrenica/Potocari.

Selima is acutely aware of the denial that continues, particularly by the Serbian and Greater Republic of Serbia's governments. The rhetoric out of those entities echoes the revered heroism bestowed upon its governmental and military leaders, and soldiers during the war. There are few memorials honoring the victims, but many honoring the "brave protectors of Serbs who lived in Bosnia at the time."

There is denial on the part of many outside of the Serbian republics, too. Just last year, Peter Handke was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for Literature. Handke, an Austrian citizen, was an ally to Slobodan Milosevic, the prime mover of those stirring up hatred and eventual genocide of Bosniaks.

Despite the International Criminal Tribunal of the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), a United Nations court of law dealing with war crimes during the war in the Balkans, imposing stiff prison sentences on many who actively participated in murders, rapes, and displacement of thousands upon thousands, many criminals still roam free in the Serbian entities. Aside from a few enlightened and brave souls, many Serbians do not acknowledge their guilt. The court was established in 1993 and disbanded in 2017 with convictions of the key architects of the campaign against Bosniaks including Milosevic, Karadzic and Mladic. Courts in the Balkans continue to try and convict war criminals. However, to this day, many of the less infamous war criminals have not been arrested or tried.

Sadly, as well, only the massacre in Srebrenica was proven to be a genocide. Other atrocities, which contributed to the murders of 100,000 men and boys, estimates of up to 50,000 women and girls raped, many thousands wounded, and the countless displaced are merely deemed "war crimes."

In fact, the term "ethnic cleansing," a mantra that Milosevic himself coined, is an oft-used phrase when referring to the actions by the Serbs. That term was adopted by the ICTY in its disposition of sentencing for most of those who were convicted and imprisoned.

It is so difficult for Selima to tell her story, as one might imagine. Yet, she sees it as her responsibility to awaken those who don't know what happened, or have forgotten.

"When I moved to the U.S. I had dreams about my family back in Bosnia. They were not nightmares at all. In the dreams we are all together playing, celebrating, and enjoying our lives together. But they stopped after about a year."

She sighs, "I miss my family more than can be imagined."

When asked what she hopes for her children and grandchildren Selima sighs.

"Not just for my children and grandchildren, but for the world, that no one gets targeted just for their beliefs, or that they carry a different name, or the color of their skin, that leads to losing loved ones; to a genocide."

This July 11 marks the 25th anniversary of the genocide. It will be commemorated in many places, but the primary location of events is at the Srebrenica Memorial in Srebrenica/Potocari.

All of us need to remember what took place; how Selima's story and the thousands of others like hers still haunt the survivors, their children and grandchildren. Many genocides have happened, and they continue to happen even today. For all those who have perished, we must never forget.

Jordan Steven Sher is a writer living in Northern California. His first book about immigrants was published in 2019. He has just completed a manuscript in an "as told to" story about another survivor of the atrocities in Bosnia. Please visit his website at jordanstevensher.com