

Monument Analysis: the Center for the Srebrenica- Potočari Memorial and Cemetery for the Victims of the 1995 Genocide, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract:

This essay briefly analyzes the context in which the marking of the 15th anniversary of the fall of Srebrenica took place. The increasing proportion of time and space given in Bosnian and foreign media is symptomatic of the turn the formation of BH identity construction and Srebrenica's respective place in it is gradually taking. In contrast, other sites of memory are treated differently, not to say discriminated, which may in the future pose a problem to other survivors in particular and Bosnian society in general.

The Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center was officially opened by the former US President Bill Clinton in 2003 following numerous administrative obstacles and political complications that constitute an integral part of the social and political life in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Memorial complex is composed of 3 parts, which include:

- 'Battery factory -Potočari' (used by the Dutch battalion *Dutchbat*) in which a memorial-room was constructed (museum space)
- Cemetery
- Memorial Wall of the names including 8372 victims listed as missing following July 1992 genocide.

As any memorial and as its very name implies, the Potočari Memorial Center was built with the view to preserving the memories of the killing of (mostly Bosniak) civilians, predominantly men and boys, who were executed by the RS and JNA Army and Chetnik paramilitary formations in the fall of Srebrenica in July 1995. The estimated number of victims is up to 9,000 and by now Tuzla Identification Coordination Division has identified 3,749 victims.¹

¹ ICMP (International Commission on Missing Persons) – ICD (Identification Coordination Division) Tuzla. www.ic-mp.org

On July 11th 2010, on the 15th anniversary of the massacre, the funeral service took place for 775 identified victims, which is the largest number of the remains that has been identified so far.² The identification of mortal remains has become even more complex due to the existence of secondary and tertiary mass graves.³

The inauguration of the Memorial Center in Potočari cannot be considered without taking into account the other side of the Srebrenica story, the binary opposition, which is social and political context of the revitalization, or more precisely, denial of the massacre.⁴ Apart from attempting to preserve the memory of genocide carried out in that location and define it as 'the site of memory', the purpose of the Memorial center is also reflected in other segments / activities that the Center aims to initiate. The Center might develop educational and research dimension in the future. A good example for this is a 'framework' for work on memory such as the '*Summer Research University Srebrenica-Potočari*' which, for the first time in 2010, gathered around 15 participants. This 3-week program was aimed at postgraduates and researchers involved in Genocide Studies, Transitional Justice, Post-conflict Studies and Human Rights.⁵ With respect to the presentation of the activities related to the Memorial itself it is important to note the existence of the following components: foundation's website, organization of guided visits for groups and individuals (in Bosnian and English language), organization of the memorial walk '*Marša mira*', marking the anniversary of the Srebrenica fall, exhibitions and panel discussions majority of which are held in July each year. Additionally, one of the well known projects dealing with the topics of *Srebrenica* is a set of photographs compiled by the photographer Tarik Samarah under the title '*Srebrenica-genocide at the heart of Europe*' which was also published as a book.⁶

When we speak of the memorial room inside the Memorial Center, apart from the items that belonged to the victims, the documentary 'Cry from the Grave' by the British director Leslie Woodhead is screened. The film director attempted to provide reconstruction of day-by-day events preceding and following the Srebrenica fall. This film is based on the recordings made during the exhumation of mass graves, testimonies of the surviving families, testimonies of the Dutch '*blue helmets*' as well as original video recordings from July 1995.

² <http://www.potocarimc.ba/ba/mc/> (3 July 2010)

³ Due to the fact that after 1995 the bodies were systematically moved to other locations in order to complicate the investigations, this paper refers to the identified mortal remains due to impossibility of finding the whole bodies of the victims.

⁴ Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik (2009) 'Knowledge, Acknowledgment and Denial in Serbia's Response to Srebrenica Massacre', *Journal of contemporary European studies* Vol.17:1, 61-74.

⁵ <http://sru.potocarimc.ba/index2.php> (3 July 2010)

⁶ <http://tarksamarah.com/> (3 July 2010)

Memory Institutionalization

One of the arguments for survivors to initiate 'work on memory' was the necessity of finding out and proving the exact sequence of events, their time and spatial frame, proving culpabilities, punishing the responsible ones and keeping alive memories of the crime. In that regard, the Memorial fully satisfies its primary function - fighting against oblivion.

The first commemoration organized by a small group of surviving family members, mostly women, was held on 11 July 1999. On that occasion the families gathered in Potočari, held a funeral service for their killed and reminded the public of the events that marked that day.⁷ One must note that despite the subsequent support (2003) from individual local political actors, including financial and legal support of the international community in BH, the origins of this 'work on memory', and the search for the missing people are the result of a long and painful process carried out by the surviving family members. Preserving the memory of the fall of the safe area of Srebrenica and everything that is connected to the events in the enclave is not reduced to the marking of July 11th. The lawsuits filed by the surviving families against the state of Holland (2007) have a very important role, as well as their commitment and participation in the proceedings before the International Court of Justice, conferences (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington) and numerous other activities related to the proving of genocide that the non-governmental organizations (*Majke Srebrenice - Mothers of Srebrenica*, *Žene žrtve rata – Women Victims of War*) and individuals („Pod zastavom UN-a“, Hasan Nuhanović) have been conducting and persevering for 15 years.

Eleven years after the first marking of the genocide, in 2010 more than 60,000 people visited Potočari on the 15th anniversary of Srebrenica's fall. The Memorial ceremony was marked by speeches of national and international officials in the presence of the BH diplomatic corps, and it was entirely broadcasted by the public BH RTV channel. Furthermore, July 11th was proclaimed a day of mourning in the District of Brčko and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁸

At the same time, the most recent decisions by some surviving families to hold funeral service for their family members beyond the official manifestation on the 11th July are symptomatic of the changes that are taking place. Media space given to memories of genocide, both inside Bosnian borders and beyond, implies the transfer from the field of individual/family marking of memories

⁷ Woodhead, Leslie (1999) *Cry from the Grave*. 150min.

⁸ Unlike Republika Srpska.

and mourning to the field of the institutionalized form of 'collective' appropriation of Srebrenica.⁹ An increasing number of public manifestations (art exhibitions, public debates and lectures), particularly in the territory of the Federation of BH illustrates significant changes in the attempts to interpret *Srebrenica*.¹⁰ The quality of majority of those manifestations is indeed questionable and they do not necessarily include consistent respect for the gravity of events, respect for the victims and their surviving family members. However, their frequency and increasing number of attendees during the ceremony is evidence of a phenomenon that exceeds a mere marking of the anniversary.

Without the commitment of survivors and their work on proving the participation and culpability of national/foreign stakeholders in the fall of Srebrenica on 11 July 1995, Srebrenica probably would not have had the significance and connotation it has now. However, a question arises as to how individual events from recent or remote past are selected to crystallize the collective memory of a certain group and what may be the consequences considering that collective identities are partly based on collective memories?

If we assume that in a close future Srebrenica would be further (collectively) perceived/developed as a paradigm for the killing of Bosnian Muslims, and that there exist a reasonable risk of being 'taken away' (or simply said - stolen) from the surviving families (through memory manipulation), the marking of other mass killings of Bosniaks and Croats, in Brčko for example (camp Luka – estimated number of victims reaches 3000), Prijedor (Omarska, Keraterm and Manjača camps) becomes questionable. Although the media covered the aforementioned events (daily press, national news), they, however, did not draw as much attention as Srebrenica.

The mechanisms that lead to define one individual/specific space as a 'site of memory' *par excellence* are questionable. If some spaces got voices, there are other spaces that continue to be silenced (Nevesinje, Višegrad 1992).¹¹ There may be several reasons for this: number of victims, particular geographic and political circumstances, etc.

One can assume that those reasons may stem from the fact that Srebrenica includes all social, political and geographic dimensions of the BiH war: media coverage of day by day events, during and after the fall of the town; a great number of civilian casualties; non-respecting the rights of the military prisoners of war; genocide against the members of non-Serb ethnicity; inertia of the

⁹ Srebrenica as a paradigm of the character of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 -1995 godine.

¹⁰ Project 'Pillar of Shame' Berlin 11 July 2010
http://www.stubsrama.com/index.php?option=com_seyret&Itemid=6&lang=de (13 August 2010)

¹¹ Jasmina Gavrankapetanović-Redžić (2010) '*Hierarchy and canonization of memory: adaptation of historiography to socio-political identity construction*'. University of Arts, Belgrade.

international community and their inability to prevent the crime; sluggishness of the proceedings conducted before the International Crime Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia; attempt of political appropriation of the Srebrenica tragedy; systematic ethical cleansing, constitutional order of BiH and organized denial. Two dimensions are intertwined in the idea of Srebrenica: Srebrenica as a place of memory and pilgrimage.

Srebrenica as a '*lieu de mémoire*' finds its premises in the past (of which the Second World War is the most recent one from a chronological point of view) and the current attempts of its appropriation are reflection of large-scale changes in BH society, particularly in its Bosniak segment.