

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Victims Need Truth and Justice

Esma Palić

Humankind will be able to recall July 11th and 12th in 1995, remembering the genocide that was committed in the United Nations safe area, Srebrenica, by the criminal hordes controlled by Ratko Mladić. Shortly after the commission of the crimes in Srebrenica, with blood on their hands and with ardent cannons, the same hordes took off to a second United Nations safe area, Žepa. Under the shower of shells, they tightened the ring around this little city in Eastern Bosnia, in which Bosniaks had lived for centuries. The place was never important to anyone but the people who were born there and lived there. All of a sudden the place become very important, as it was situated on the road to a Greater Serbia.

When people in Žepa learned that Srebrenica had fallen, they stayed silent, having no words, as there was nothing to say. People knew that they would face the same destiny. More than one hundred kilometers from the frontline held by the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina and close to the border with Serbia, from where for years they had been bombing us from the air and the ground during their aggression, we were trapped. The concentration of enemy armed forces and armaments, led by the criminal Mladić, left no room to even the most courageous imagination.

It is true that we were a United Nations safe area, where had the Geneva Conventions and Humanitarian Law indeed applied, the genocidal forces would not have had the chance to come close. As we knew from previous experience, however, in the course of these hard days, we ascertained that such norms were just letters on paper that were never applied by the United Nations Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, even though these norms were precisely the United Nations mandate in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in the declared safe areas. Being aware of the horrible crimes that had happened in Srebrenica, my husband Avdo Palić, Commander of the Žepa defense, along with his companions and co-combatants, organized the defense of the Žepa territory aiming at buying time until the authorities in Sarajevo and the international community realized what had just happened to people in Srebrenica and that the same destiny was to happen to the inhabitants of Žepa if not given aid and protection as soon as possible. For thirteen days defenders in the Žepa Brigade resisted with rifles that were firing against the powerful techniques used by Mladić's six armed brigades attacking the area. Appeals for help were sent out every day. The population was forced to abandon damaged and destroyed houses and run into the hills, where they formed huge refugee camps waiting for the fateful moment - death or help. But there

was no help from anywhere. Mladić kept making demands to surrender and leave the territory.

As the time passed, the ring of Mladić's forces tightened. Eventually we had to accept the bitter reality that we would not survive in Žepa and that we had to accept the ultimatum to leave the enclave.

On July 24th, in the presence of the UN representatives, an agreement on the deportation of civilians from the United Nations safe area was concluded between the Žepa representatives and Mladić's emissaries. The same day, columns of buses and trucks, loaded with distraught and battered people started to move out of Žepa, being attended to by bearded creatures shouting: "C'mon Kurds, go to Turkey."

I, with my two babies, was in that column. Our state of tiredness and fear was nothing in comparison to the fear I had for my husband. I was shaking with the feeling of worthlessness and humiliation that we found ourselves in, being watched by the entire world, as if we were subjects in an experiment to establish the human limit of resistance to violence and cruelty. The feelings of being left to the most horrible criminals create bitterness that is very hard to swallow. But there was no other choice than to look down and leave the enclave.

Arrival at the co-called free territory did not bring me peace, as my husband remained in Žepa to struggle for the release of people who still remained in the enclave. He had to ensure their "safe" evacuation. I was aware of his determination to perform his duty with honor and the utmost decency, no matter what danger it put him in.

Upon Mladić's order, on July 26th, the last convoy of 806 civilians and 35 wounded was captured and the condition for their release was that Commander Palić come to negotiate conditions of surrender. Avdo rejected that demand. Due to these problems occurring, the United Nations Commander in Chief, Rupert Smith, announced his urgent arrival to Žepa to resolve the status of civilians and soldiers who were imprisoned.

On July 27th, Avdo went to attend a scheduled meeting in the United Nations base in Žepa expecting to find there Smith and Mladić's emissaries. Mladić was hosting Smith elsewhere. Instead of them, Avdo faced armed Serb soldiers who, in front of United Nations soldiers and observers, arrested him in a very cruel manner and took him toward Bokšanica, Mladić's Headquarters, from where Mladić was running the operations around Žepa. The same day they arrested Mehmed Hajrić, President of the War Presidency of the Municipality of Žepa, and Amir Imamović, Chief of Staff of the Civil Defense. The key people in Žepa, who were struggling beyond every human capability to prevent another act of genocide, were arrested. The media announced the information regarding these arrests, but no one reacted. It was as if such a sequence of events was logical after all that happened those days in the protected zones of Srebrenica and Žepa.

When the key people in Žepa were arrested, the government in Sarajevo through the United Nations reached an agreement with Slobodan Milošević that the men from Žepa could cross the border and go into Serbia. The other option was the one left to

the Srebrenica people - to go through the forests in order to reach free territory. Many decided to go to Serbia where they were then put in the Šljivovica and Mitrovo Polje camps. Serbian police forces maltreated them and beat them; some were killed. The majority of those who decided to go through the forests to reach free territory actually died. Six out of eighty people in a group succeeded in surviving, while only two or three men from the smaller groups survived.

At a press conference held on July 28th, the United Nations spokesman Alexander Ivanko announced that all inhabitants of Žepa had been evacuated, even though the Commander of Defense of Žepa, Colonel Palić, was arrested by Mladić's forces and United Nations did not have reliable information as to whether he was still alive. That is the day when hell entered my life. I believed that, at the time, my husband was alive, which turned out to be true. I was going to many places seeking help to release him. I was hoping that those responsible within the United Nations and the Bosnian and Herzegovinian authorities would understand that Avdo's release was the minimum that he deserved and belonged to him legally and morally. No one responded to my desperate appeals. The tragedy of Srebrenica appeared to be floating around the public like a ghost. Žepa was barely mentioned. Some dared to say they saved the people of Žepa. We who were there knew who was helping us and who eventually saved us. It is not clear to me today whether our evacuation was a pre-planned or an unplanned outcome. Even on those fatal days in July of 1995 in Žepa, I sensed that everything was happening according to a certain aim and guideline, and the people of the enclave, in all these events, were being sacrificed. The Dayton Peace Agreement that was signed shortly thereafter confirmed this feeling.

It was peace only for those who had the power to decide and calculate with human lives. In the shadow of their interest arose a new, emotional-psychological war that caught tens of thousands of families of disappeared people. This war, for many people, including me today, twelve years after the peace was signed, still goes on.

When my husband was arrested, everything stopped for me but my immeasurable need to help him win his release. I swallowed the bitterness of ignoring the obligation of the United Nations and the Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina and started to fight the battle on my own. For years I lived in fear and uncertainty as to his destiny, hoping that he may have survived. I lived for the moment to see him coming home. Countless number of times I returned home from my job, having a dream that, on that very day, by some miracle, Avdo would come home and that I, upon opening the door, would see him playing with our daughters. How many times I woke up after nightmares but, in reality, I was struggling against the images of the torture he was going through. Every morning, before I opened my eyes, his face showed up with the question what I could do today to help him. I have been waking up for twelve years with the same question, thinking that I have done everything I am able to. I attained all the important information on his arrest, on his being taken away, on his being hidden in secret prisons under Mladić's control, but I have not learned the definite truth regarding his destiny. The Republika Srpska authorities said he was killed. But they do everything to prevent me from learning who killed him and where his bones are. Of course, the Republika Srpska authorities can act like that, as they have not been sanctioned by the international community institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, even though it is the international community's mandate. At a court

proceeding, I succeeded in proving the human-rights violation committed by the Republica Srpska authorities.

No matter how negative my experience, especially in the context of the behavior of the international community both during and after the war, I still have hope in the remnants of the human soul and the tenacity of justice. I believe that time will help those who know the truth about the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the disgraceful betrayal of Srebrenica and the committed genocide. I believe that time will pull their strength together to start speaking the truth even if that would lead to their own responsibility. The culmination of war crimes risks letting the truth get lost behind the front of non-truths, the lies and the denial of genocide coming from the Serbian criminal nest, from where creators of evil and executors of genocide still operate.

Every human being is sometimes alone and analyzes her or his own behavior. This fact helped me to understand my husband's boundless victimization at the time Žepa was occupied. Avdo could have left the population of Žepa, as others did, trying to save their lives. He could have done it but he did not. Had he have done so, I am sure we would be talking today about the genocide that had occurred in Žepa as well. Avdo would not have been able to live being aware that he had neglected his responsibility in order to save his own skin.

We, the survivors, are also responsible - and that is to truth and justice. It is a hard but honorable and destined path to be taken, in order to prevent crime, particularly the crime of genocide, ever from happening to someone. In the years that are coming after the Srebrenica and Žepa, those who survived have spent their time mainly trying to find out the truth about the destiny of their beloved ones, and many thoughts and explanations have been given that additionally hurt the victims. There were and still are denials that genocide had been committed, major war criminals are still at large, the passive and disgraceful role of the United Nations is still being covered up, while victims keep asking themselves how come they had been through such a tragedy under the United Nations protection. Victims have a clear feeling that they were betrayed and that they are being treated in a manner that is a sharp departure from human dignity and human rights. They also have a strong need to realize the truth.

However, the truth has its own way. Incompletely, albeit clearly, it came out of the mouth of Mr. Richard Holbrooke, when he spoke at the Tenth Year Commemoration of Genocide in Srebrenica. Mr. Holbrooke admitted that he was instructed to hand over the Eastern Bosnia enclaves to the Serbs, and that, even though it was hard, he had to do it. The fact that we were deeply aware of was spoken in public. Mr. Holbrooke's speech set forward a sea of emotions but, in the end, I thought: Thank you, Mr. Holbrooke, for pulling your strength together to say the truth, no matter how painful it was. I hope that others will understand the importance of your honesty, as the only thing the victims need and must be given are TRUTH AND JUSTICE.

Translated by Zarije Seizović - © 2007 Zarije Seizović

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.