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Witness of Genocide: I have to tell the truth to oppose oblivion

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It is July 9th today. On this day, 20 years ago, I was almost nine years old which are symbolized by these nine flowers of Srebrenica on my clothes today. I survived genocide. Once in life one can be the child which I never was. I will never know what a carefree childhood looks like. Because my childhood had been destroyed before it even started by nothing other than genocide! During the war I finished three years of primary school which I do not even remember. Yes, I do not remember how I learned to read, write, count … The only thing I remember is that I had only one notebook. As it was for all subjects, I would write in it at school, and when I got home I learned what was written and erased everything so I could have enough space for writing the following day. My childhood, freedom, warm mother's lap, my father's presence, and home were taken away from me! Everything was gone, and a struggle for life was the only thing that stayed.

July 11, 1995. It was Tuesday. That day the city was choking with fear, because the evil was on the threshold of Srebrenica, bloody and delusional. The evil defeated kindness – love was won by hatred and life was defeated by death. Children and grownups, the born and unborn, went through a reign of terror! My city has become a camp! With thousands of fellow citizens, I looked death in the face! We did not know whether we would survive because we did not have the right to life! In that July, Srebrenica had no right to life! It was condemned to genocide.

I hardly remember the day when we went from our apartment towards Potočari. From early morning my town was heavily shelled! My father came back from the battle, and he packed his bag again. We all behaved strangely, hiding our tears and looking away. The farewell was about to come. For some people, it was the last time to see each other. Some of them never saw their loved ones again!

Someone said out loud: "They moved into Srebrenica, we all have to go towards Potocari!" Screaming broke through the hallway! My mother got my little brother and me ready while my dad was already at the front door. He strangely hugged and kissed us, and it seemed like something never before. I know he was afraid that he would not see us again! Anyway, he quickly turned around and walked away.

My mother was petrified but brave. Driven by fear, that 34-year-old woman with two

little children risked her life and embarked on the path of salvation! We quickly reached the besieged Potocari, and then the woman from the masses appeared and said in tears:"I met your father and he told me: Send salaams (greetings) to my family if you see them anywhere and kiss my children. Tell them not to worry. And he went." Those words that my father sent over one of heroine mothers of Srebrenica, Munira Subasić, will always echo in my ears.

A mass of distraught women, children, and old people…was constantly filling the camp Potocari. We spent two nights there. The first night my mother saw men, women, and boys taken away… The night was filled by the painful screams of mothers, crying children, while the air smelled of the fresh blood that soaked Potocari. Fortunately, we slept.

That night we stayed overnight under the bridge near the turn to the present Memorial Room. Unaware of what was happening and where we were, my brother and I slept again. Thank God, because who knows what would have happened if we had not? My mother stayed awake till dawn. She was the witness of the most painful night. The witness of genocide! The meadow in Potocari and the terrible July night were filled by the eerie cries of raped women, mothers whose born and unborn children were taken away, lost and sad looks of terrified people…

She told us she trembled so much she had a feeling that tje ground under her was shaking. She tried to escape several times in fear of what could happen, but each time she would turn around and look at us. She came back. She prayed to God to give her a deaf ear and a blind eye because she could no longer endure listening to the screams of the innocent people. That sight made her blood ran cold. God made it easier; dawn came after a night that was as long as a year. Immediately, we were awakened to go to the buses. She spoke: "I'll kill myself and my children, but here I will not stay another minute!"

My mother was strong and powerful like never before, and she went through the mass of people towards the buses. At the entrance to the bus she was stopped by the soldier! He asked her where she was taking my brother. She froze! While she was worriedly looking at my brother firmly squeezing him by her, the soldier turned away, and we stealthily entered the bus. Other terrified people also came in. The bus was headed towards Kladanj. Men and boys were separated on the other side saying that allegedly they would be picked up by another bus. A violent death took them away, unfortunately. The road to freedom was infinitely long. Mom was literally putting my brother under her feet so they could not see him, because many younger than him were left, and he was twelve years old that year.

We arrived at Tisca and headed on foot towards Kladanj. The mass of people driven by fear were swarming toward freedom. At one point, my brother said – Mom, these are "ours." And she again pushed his head towards the ground, to quiet him. Shortly afterwards he again said "These are ours." I recognized them by their uniforms. We arrived in front of the tunnel, and my mother recognized my father's fellow-soldiers. She lost consciousness. Only then did she realize she saved us from certain death. We started screaming helplessly dragging our mother's body and asking for help! Someone approached us, helped to cool her down, and she regained consciousness.

We continued, firmly holding her hands as if she would leave us! Soon we arrived to Kladanj, and then we were driven to the airport Dubrava.

Mother was visibly ill, mentally and physically. She lost eight pounds in two days. Her legs were bloody. She had terrible wounds all over her head, feet, legs, arms. That terrible July night she received a rude shock. In fear she unconsciously kept hitting herself and pulling her hair! She barely recovered. She was constantly provided aid by the ambulance service. Seven days later she was a little better. We received a room for accommodation.

It was the eleventh day of the fall of Srebrenica, and we did not know anything about my father. I went with my mother for lunch, my brother stayed in the room. At the end of the road that led down into the valley, I saw three men. Barefoot with rolled up trousers of camouflage pants, torn shirts … My father? Yes. It was him. Fear gripped us. He was accompanied by a relative and a fellow-fighter. After a few seconds, I found myself in his arms.

The cry of a father and child echoed through the valley! My hero, my father, seemingly strong… he knelt down and cried like a child. Only then I became aware of what could have happened! Not letting go of my arm, he embraced my mother. We went after my brother. Others could see freedom, happiness and gathering of a family that faced genocide and was saved from the place of the death.

What was to follow were years of struggle in peace. Education, the struggle for existence… countless obstacles, humiliation, and blackmailing occurred just because we were refugees from Srebrenica. But we managed to beat the tragedy that had befallen us. My mother, a housewife, and my father, a trader, created a path to success for us out of charred homes. With my father’s minimal salary, we were educated although we lived for fourteen years as tenants in a conditional house with no bathrooms, water, windows… Anyway, we managed to be side by side with children who had all, and we had our home again. My parents are the greatest lesson of my life.

What if there was no war? I would have a basis for life, my childhood. I would remember carefree days, not grenades and evil! Potocari would be sown with wheat instead of white tombstones, the silence of which is like a soul-destroying scream. But it happened! Genocide happened! We survived, but a part of our souls stayed trapped in Potocari. In the hills and forests of the Drina Valley, timeless thoughts and longing for loved ones remain.

Our pain is unlimited in time. Srebrenica and its martyrs are living through our memory. They left the voice of silence in the fields of Potočari covered by the whiteness of tombstones as the inheritance for us to speak tirelessly about their victims and their existence. To speak because they are not able to speak!

Their mothers – heroines – the Mothers of Srebrenica are the biggest lesson of life to all of us. With their lost motherhood, everything vanished, except an immeasurable two decades long desire for justice. They do not have great expectations; they live quietly, immeasurably strong, courageous, and patient. They found meaning in pain.

Srebrenica will forever be the sin of mankind and proof of how great evil can be. It can become still even greater if we forget because without the knowledge of the past, we have no place in the future! The amazing and unsurpassed strength of people from Srebrenica overcame evil with goodness, hatred with love, oblivion with memories!

This testimony is my debt to those who remained the eternal guard of the Potočari Memorial as guides, as warnings, as painful reminders of the fact that genocide must not be forgotten. We have 8,372 reasons for remembering …

I am a witness of genocide; I survived just to speak…

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of the historical memory of the genocide in Srebrenica.

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Translated by Alice Grabovica

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