

## **Dreaming of a better Bosnia**

**By Suzana Vukic**

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Last July, the world commemorated the 16th anniversary of the Srebrenica Genocide, when over 8,000 Muslim men and boys were murdered by Serb forces. But few people know about the Srebrenica Peace March, a journey preceding the anniversary that commemorates the perilous trek undertaken by Bosnian Muslims (known as Bosniaks) in July, 1995 in an attempt to flee death and reach safe territory.

New Yorker Senahid Halilovic survived this genocide by joining a group of people who escaped the town on foot as Gen. Ratko Mladic (now standing trial for war crimes at The Hague) and his forces overtook what was supposed to be the U.N. safe haven of Srebrenica. However, Mr. Halilovic's father and three brothers were killed in what would be remembered as the greatest atrocity to take place on European soil since the end of World War II. He lost a total of 70 relatives in the Bosnian war.

Mr. Halilovic had returned to Srebrenica three times prior to this summer; his father and brothers are all buried at the cemetery and memorial center in Srebrenica-Potocari. But this past July, Mr. Halilovic participated in the Peace March for the first time since undertaking that ominous journey 16 years ago.

Before the trip, Mr. Halilovic expected to face many difficult, emotional moments. "You can try to imagine what it [the Peace March] will be like, but until you actually go through it, you really have no idea what to expect", he explains.

Mr. Halilovic lived through a harrowing venture 16 years ago. People were tired and hungry. They followed guides through heavily mountainous and forested terrain while Serb fighters attacked them with gunshots, bombs and grenades.

These images of the past came back to Mr. Halilovic during the Peace March. The first day was difficult. During the second and third days, Mr. Halilovic kept himself busy meeting and interviewing people via camcorder, to learn more about other individuals' stories and reasons for being there. It made the journey more bearable. But the arrival at the Srebrenica-Potocari Memorial Center at the end of the third day was quite hard. Seeing the graves brought back memories of his family, friends, and childhood.

Mr. Halilovic was pleased to see people of from all over the world – even from as far away as Japan – at the Peace March. "There were people from Serbia who came, people from the organization Women in Black...I think this is good. This can help bring about what I truly would like to see – a lasting, just peace in this region. When you see someone from Serbia come and

face victims of genocide, to recognize it, and to say, ‘Yes indeed, it was genocide that took place in this region, there is no real peace until we all start thinking this way’, then you start to get a different feeling”, says Mr. Halilovic.

This is phenomenal when one ponders Serbian reluctance to acknowledge any wrongdoing in the Balkan wars of the 1990’s. For this reason, groups like Women in Black are often reviled in Serbia, where the voice of dissent and conscience is often stifled. That is why organizations like Women in Black are so necessary in that country. They challenge their fellow countrymen’s perceptions of Serbia’s role in the Balkan wars and also demonstrate that it is possible for Serbs to take responsibility for what went wrong following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia.

Mr. Halilovic moved to the U.S. in 2002, where he lives with his wife and three children. He earned a bachelor’s degree in chemical engineering while still in Bosnia, and a master’s degree in chemistry since settling in America. Despite his hardships and losses, he is blessed with a good and successful life. Regardless, it is difficult for him to return to Bosnia and witness certain injustices – the principal one being the existence of Republika Srpska.

The Dayton Peace Accords that ended the war in 1995 divided the country into two entities: The Bosnian Serb Republic (Republika Srpska) and the Muslim-Croat Federation. Mr. Halilovic rightfully sees the Dayton Accord as a failure. It was supposed to guarantee the safe, unhindered return of refugees to their former homes. But this simply hasn’t happened. He points out that the majority of non-Serb refugees (Bosniaks, Croats) would never return to live in Republika Srpska, where they would feel like outsiders; likewise, Serbs do not want to live in the Federation.

Mr. Halilovic’s solution to this dilemma is simple: the existence of a single, unified Bosnia and Herzegovina minus the two entities – a nation where equal rights would be guaranteed to all citizens in all regions regardless of ethnic origin. It sounds simple, but he acknowledges that with time, this seems less and less likely to happen. He points out that international leaders were the ones who pushed for the Dayton Accord. And now, it feels as though a major world player would prefer to continue having Bosnia remain a nation where growth and prosperity will forever be hindered.

We need to listen to the voices of Bosnia ’s survivors when they tell us that change is necessary. While the West may be to blame for Bosnia’s current predicament, it also has the power to create the change so desperately needed in that country.

## **[My heart is in Srebrenica](#)**

***By Suzana Vukic***

*I believe every person has a heart and if you can reach it, you can make a difference.” – Uli Derickson*

My heart is in Srebrenica, but I can't physically be there – not this summer. Yet it's still possible to connect with the victims and survivors of the Srebrenica Genocide, to hear their voices and stories.

New Yorker Senahid Halilovic, a man who survived Srebrenica, told me his story. His triumph is overshadowed by loss: Senahid's father and three brothers were killed in this genocide. He lost a total of 70 relatives in Srebrenica.

Senahid has returned to Srebrenica three times since settling in the U.S. in 2002. His father and three brothers are buried at the cemetery and memorial centre in Srebrenica-Potocari. But this summer, Senahid will be participating in the Peace March for the first time ever. It's a march (also alternately known as the death march, or march to freedom) that commemorates the route that Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) men from Srebrenica took in July, 1995 in an attempt to escape certain death when Bosnian Serb forces, led by Ratko Mladic, overtook the U.N.-protected enclave. It precedes the July 11th commemoration and communal burial.

In 1993, the visiting U.N. General Philippe Morillon promised safety to the people of Srebrenica: this town became a demilitarized U.N. safe zone. But on July 11, 1995, the day that Srebrenica fell into the hands of Mladic's forces, Senahid (who was 23) was convinced he'd perish if he remained in Srebrenica. Town elders suggested they all collectively present themselves at the U.N. base to seek safety. But Senahid and his peers felt all "capable" men of fighting age would be better off escaping through the woods and mountains to reach free Bosnian-held territory, rather than to depend on the mercy of the U.N. and Serb forces. "....This way, I could give myself a 50% chance of survival. By going to the U.N. base, I figured I could give myself a 1% chance for survival....In the end, sadly, we all know what happened to them (men who went to the U.N. seeking safety)....", he explains.

What followed was a harrowing venture through difficult terrain and circumstances. Senahid estimates that a total of 15,000 people left Srebrenica that night under the cover of darkness, including some older people, women and girls, all seeking survival. People were hungry, terrified and desperate. They formed a column and were directed by guides and leaders who had knowledge of the terrain and sought out the best paths to take in order to ensure the survival of the greatest number of people.

They went through forests, mountains, and ruined and abandoned Bosniak villages that had been overtaken by Serb forces in 1992. They often came under attack by Serb forces during their trek; they were shot at or had bombs and grenades thrown in their direction.

Senahid made it to safe, Bosnian-held territory somewhere on the night of the 16 (going into the 17) of July. He estimates that roughly 3000 people trickled through in the following days. But many were captured and killed before they could reach freedom.

While on the run, his survival instincts had taken over. Once he reached freedom, however, all of the horrible images of what he'd lived through came flooding back to him. Senahid found his mother at a refugee tent at the Tuzla airport, but his father and three brothers would never be seen alive again. His grief-stricken mother cried incessantly. To escape the horrors of the past, Senahid signed up for university courses and earned a degree in chemical engineering by 2001.

That year, Senahid went to Croatia. By 2002, he resettled in the United States, where he lives today with his wife and three children.

What are Senahid's expectations for the Peace March, after so many years since his narrow escape from death? He expects it to be a difficult, emotional experience. On the other hand, Senahid is glad to have the opportunity to revisit the path to freedom that he took so many years ago.

"...I consider it (the Peace March) to be an obligation, not only for myself, but an obligation belonging to all people who carry within themselves a sense of humanity", explains Senahid. With this reminder of obligation, I renew my personal commitment to one day visit the cemetery and memorial centre at Srebrenica-Potocari and to participate in the Peace March.

## **Mladic's arrest**

*Author Suzana Vukic*

News of Ratko Mladic's arrest seemed surreal. On May 26th, I was with Bakira Hasecic, president of the Sarajevo-based association Women Victims of War and survivor of wartime rape. We drove to a breakfast meeting in Ottawa to wrap up a conference in Montebello hosted by the Nobel Women's Initiative: Women Forging a New Security: Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict. Esad Krcic of New York's Bosniak community called, informing me of Mladic's arrest the previous evening.

I was stunned. And Bakira was overjoyed. She broke the news of Mladic's arrest to parliamentarians, journalists and stakeholders. But first, she described the rapes and aggression she survived in 1992. Her town Visegrad, in eastern Bosnia, was overtaken by Serb forces and cleansed of its Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) majority. Bakira's news of Mladic's arrest was greeted with heartfelt applause. The words and presence of this brave woman enabled people to understand why it's important for vermin like Mladic to be brought to justice.

Bakira's battle doesn't end there. Back in Bosnia, she attended a communal burial in Visegrad for 17 Bosniaks – people killed during the war whose remains were recently exhumed. Bakira attended a similar event earlier in May for 18 Bosniaks, including her sister, Bedrija Durakovic. Serb forces overtook Bedrija's house, in nearby Vlasenica, turning it into a rape camp. She and other women were held there and sexually violated in horrifying ways. Six months into her captivity, Bedrija was killed, along with several other women and girls (on one man's orders).

Through her own extraordinary efforts, Bakira discovered these facts, as well as the location of her sister's remains. Countless Bosniaks live with this sort of gaping wound. Bakira had the guts to go back to her hometown (although she resides mainly in Sarajevo). Visegrad is in Republika Srpska. War criminals walk its streets freely. They're in positions of power in politics, at city hall, and with the police. Most Bosniaks don't return; they can't bear to be laughed at and taunted

by the killers (former friends and neighbours) who forced them to flee. But Bakira confronts them openly – “Don’t worry, your turn is coming up.”

Bakira was appalled to hear that Judge Christoph Flugge was assigned to Mladic’s trial at the Hague. This man created controversy in 2009 when he stated in German magazine Der Spiegel that the term “genocide” to define the crimes in Srebrenica and Bosnia and Herzegovina during 1992-1995 was unnecessary; he preferred calling it “mass murder.” He claimed there’s no reason to differentiate between a group that is murdered for their nationality, religion, ethnicity or race (as regulated by the Hague Statute) and a group that happens to be gathered at a specific location.

I could feel Bakira’s anger over the phone: “This man (Mladic) ruined our lives. It’s unthinkable that he be allowed to get away with what he’s done.” Bakira and others have embarked on protest campaigns demanding that Flugge be disqualified from trying Mladic’s case.

What took place in Srebrenica in July, 1995 has already been recognized as genocide by The Hague, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the European Union and the United States. These murders were not carried out on a random population that happened to be gathered there. Bosniak males were targeted and exterminated, while women and girls were forcibly expelled (except for those kept aside for rape houses).

Flugge’s stance plays enormously in Mladic’s favour; it’s exactly what he wants. But it’s ruinous for Bosniaks, the chief victims of the war. These people were almost annihilated.

As for Mladic, this bizarre-looking man may seem a far cry from the pudgy and porcine killer that we remember. But remember, many lives were cut short because of this man’s hateful actions.

He and his supporters want the world to see the Bosnian war as a civil war where: some truly unfortunate things happened; all sides (Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat, Bosniak) committed atrocities; all sides were equally victimized; and that everything is just fine right now. Those familiar with the Bosnian war and its aftermath know this is a whitewashed version that hides crucial facts – for example, that the greatest number of victims of the war were Bosniaks, and that overwhelming responsibility for the genocide lies with the Bosnian Serbs.

I’d love to meet the person brave enough to look Bakira Hasecic in the eye and tell her that what happened to her people was not genocide.

## **Sweet justice**

***By Suzana Vukic***

There are days in our lives that are filled with endless beauty and serenity, even if at times fraught with difficult and tearful moments. This is how I’d describe recent days when I had the

tremendous joy of meeting Bakira Hasecic, president of the Sarajevo-based association Women Victims of War and a survivor of mass and systematic rape during the Bosnian war.

I've written about Bakira in the past, most recently in a book published in May, 2011 by The Learning Centre of Vanier College entitled *In Her Name: Inspirational Women 2011*, registered with Library and Archives, Canada. This book is the result of a writing competition hosted in honour of International Women's Day and includes 40 short entries on inspirational women.

In mid-May, I e-mailed Bakira to inform her of the book. To my surprise, Bakira replied that she'd be coming to Canada – to Montebello, Quebec, from May 23-25, for an international three-day conference hosted by the Nobel Women's Initiative – “Women Forging a New Security: Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict.”

Destiny's hand was at work. I was excited at the thought of finally meeting Bakira in person and possibly attending what promised to be an amazing conference.

I soon discovered the conference was already booked beyond capacity; attending would be impossible. Nevertheless, I decided to find a way to meet Bakira face-to-face.

A series of problems arose regarding Bakira's trip and attendance at the conference, including a flight delay. Just two days before her arrival, I was contacted by Esad Krcic of New York's Bosniak community, who asked me to assist with Bakira's arrival in Canada and attendance at the conference.

In the end, I took time off work to help out. I picked up Bakira on Monday, May 23<sup>rd</sup> at Pierre Elliott Trudeau airport at Dorval (Montreal) and drove her to Montebello. I returned Wednesday afternoon to replace Bakira's interpreter, Zeljko Milicevic, at the conference. The following morning, I accompanied Bakira to a breakfast meeting and panel discussion in Ottawa hosted by the Nobel Women's Initiative, a wrap-up of the conference. Afterwards, Bakira and I returned to Montreal for a few hours of intense power-shopping before I took her back to the airport for her return flight to Sarajevo.

It's impossible to meet this incredible woman for the first time and not shed a tear, knowing everything she's been through and what she's accomplished. But Bakira is a strong woman and makes it clear she doesn't want anyone's tears. What she wants is justice – for herself and other victims of wartime rape and aggression.

“My one reason for making the effort to go abroad and attend these events is to achieve justice for victims, and to do everything in my power to bring as many war criminals as possible to justice”, Bakira told me more than once in the course of those days.

The organization that delivered this extraordinary event, the Nobel Women's Initiative, was spearheaded by six Nobel peace laureates in 2006. Their intention was to promote women's groups and causes on a global scale, with the goal of working towards peace, justice, and

equality. Three of these incredible women – Jody Williams, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, and Shirin Ebadi, were at the conference. The others – Betty Williams, Wangari Maathai, and Rigoberta Menchu, could not be present.

The purpose of this conference was to come up with solutions for putting an end to sexual violence in armed conflict – “the war that is being waged on women’s bodies”, as put by Nobel laureate and conference chairperson, Jody Williams. Over 120 women from thirty countries were present. Amongst them were survivors of the most brutal forms of wartime rape and sexual aggression. A few of them, like Bakira, shared their stories. Other guests included women from various government and non-governmental organizations, along with the media. Those present had an opportunity to offer their input and share ideas on strategies towards finding a solution to end this horror.

Through smaller group discussions and brainstorming sessions, participants had opportunities to discuss possible methods of combating this problem. One of the most important amongst these is finding a way to offer adequate support to survivors – and more specifically, creating a victim-centred approach. This is crucial considering that after a sexual aggression during warfare, victims are often shamed, isolated and marginalized. Very little is normally available to them in the way of resources or support.

It’s disturbing to learn that sexual violence is being used increasingly throughout the world as an effective war strategy. I once thought that the world learned absolutely nothing following the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides of the 1990’s. Now I realize this isn’t so; rather, the wrong people have learned the wrong lessons. Would-be dictators, demagogues and war lords the world over have learned that: a) rape is an extremely effective way of destroying an enemy tribe or ethnic group, and b) it’s possible to commit mass and systematic wartime rape, as well as other crimes against humanity, and get away with it.

We hear about rape taking place *right now* in the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). But did you know that *everyday* an average of 1100 women are raped in the DRC? I was surprised to hear one guest speak of women in the North-East Indian province of Manipur (a region in conflict) being raped by government soldiers. Why don’t we ever hear about this in the news?

Justice was discussed . On May 25<sup>th</sup>, Bakira delivered a speech focused on Bosnian Serb war criminal, Ratko Mladic – one of the leaders of the Bosnian genocide who remained at large (at that point). She asked for everyone’s help in getting him arrested.

At a group discussion on justice that we attended together, participants brought forth a number of ideas. Adequate and appropriate reparations to victims was a focal point. However, achieving this isn’t easy. For a victim who has been sexually violated, had her home destroyed, and saw members of her family killed, it may not be possible to provide her with reparations that can ever compensate for all of her loss and suffering.

So how do we achieve justice? How do we help the victims of wartime sexual violence? How can we remove the impunity that protects war criminals?

There were no easy answers. But it was recognized that governments, especially ones that fail to uphold human rights, need to be pressured to follow international human rights laws. They must be held accountable when human rights abuses take place within their borders. With the current status quo, it's difficult to see how victims can expect to find justice. Today in Libya, for example, it would be absurd for a rape victim to look to Gaddafi's government for justice and reparations considering that this is the regime responsible for her suffering. Likewise, as Bakira noted, in Republika Srpska (the Serb Republic entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina), the regime absolutely refuses to acknowledge war victims and their rights.

Justice is often elusive. Nevertheless, it can prevail. On Thursday, May 26, the morning after the conference ended, Bakira and I drove to Ottawa to attend a breakfast meeting and panel discussion that was set up to get the message of the conference out to journalists, parliamentarians and stakeholders. Just minutes away from our destination, I got a call from Esad Krcic informing me that Ratko Mladic had been arrested the previous evening.

It seemed surreal. I was in stunned disbelief as I told Bakira the news. Her very vocal joy helped me snap out of it as I passed the phone to her. It slowly dawned on me that I'd never expected to be in those circumstances and to have the honour of announcing to Bakira, of all people, the news of Mladic's arrest.

Towards the end of the meeting, Bakira had the opportunity to announce the news of Mladic's arrest to everyone present. I felt honoured to be by her side, interpreting for her. First, Bakira introduced herself and described some of the horrors that she and her family lived through during the war:

"My next door neighbour – a police officer at the time – Veljko Planincic, forced his way into our home, accompanied by about 20-30 individuals – members of the JNA (Yugoslav National Army).....one of these men...raped my older daughter (18) in a bedroom in front of my husband, myself, and my younger daughter (15). After this, they busted her head with the butt of a rifle....", recounted Bakira with great difficulty.

"...I was taken (and raped) from May 21st, 1992 onwards – the first time at the local police station, the second time at a local high school, and the third time at an institute for women and children with intellectual deficiencies. I survived Golgotha. I witnessed slaughter, killings. I was raped and sexually violated numerous times...."

Bakira's courage in disclosing the horrors of her wartime rape had an enormous impact on everyone present. When Bakira announced Mladic's arrest, the tremendous applause that came forth seemed heartfelt.

We hear about rapes in armed conflict but can't grasp the full of horror of it . When you have a real live person standing in front of you bravely describing these monstrosities, you get a true



sense of the injustice being committed on a global scale. Because of Bakira's words and presence, every single person in that room understood why it's important for vermin like Mladic to be hunted down and brought to justice.

It's important to remember there are many more of them out there. Bakira ended by asking for everyone's help in bringing Bosnian Serb war criminal Lazar Mutlak (residing in Canada) to justice. She also reminded everyone that retired Canadian general Lewis Mackenzie has been indicted by the Bosnian Court of Justice for war crimes (the rape of two women), which allegedly occurred during the time he led a peace-keeping mission in war-torn Bosnia. Mackenzie has never had to face these charges because of his diplomatic immunity.

Bakira was extremely grateful for the warm welcome she received while in Canada. I know that it made her uncomfortable to bring up this sordid detail regarding Mackenzie to a Canadian audience. But it was necessary. How can we judge other governments for their wrongdoing (for example, the actions of the Indian government in Manipur) if we Canadians can't keep our own house in order?

Justice is often elusive. There's already tons of speculation as to why Serbia finally "discovered" the whereabouts of Ratko Mladic at this late date. But for a brief moment, justice felt real and palpable, and it was sweet. I'm hoping we'll all get to experience more of these sweet moments in the future.

## **Ending sexual violence in armed conflict**

**By Suzana Vukic**

"My next door neighbour – a police officer at the time – Veljko Planincic, forced his way into our home, accompanied by about 20-30 individuals – members of the JNA (Yugoslav National Army).....one of these men...raped my older daughter (18) in a bedroom in front of my husband, myself, and my younger daughter (15). After this, they busted her head with the butt of a rifle....", recounted Bakira with great difficulty.

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Bakira Hasecic, president of the Sarajevo-based association Women Victims of War, was describing some of the horrors that she and her family lived through during the Bosnian war when Serb forces overtook her town, Visegrad, in eastern Bosnia, ethnically cleansing its majority Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) population. She addressed journalists, parliamentarians and stakeholders at a breakfast meeting and panel discussion following an international three-day conference hosted by the Nobel Women's Initiative – "Women Forging a New Security: Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict." It was held in Montebello, Quebec from May 23-25.

Six Nobel peace laureates joined forces in 2006 to create the Nobel Women's Initiative. Three of them – Jody Williams, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, and Shirin Ebadi, were at last week's conference. The others – Betty Williams, Wangari Maathai, and Rigoberta Menchu, could not be present. These incredible women sought to use the strength and power of the Nobel Peace Prize to promote women's groups and causes on a global scale, working towards peace, justice and equality.

The conference focused on the devastation faced by women around the world in situations of armed conflict. Sexual violence is being used increasingly as an effective war strategy in places like Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Over 120 women from all over the world were present. Some, like Bakira, have survived unspeakable forms of rape and shared their stories. Other women from various government and non-governmental organizations, including media, were there to offer their input on strategy. A number of concepts were discussed as methods of putting an end to sexual violence in warfare: offering adequate support to survivors; fighting for justice; and banishing the concept of impunity.

By chance, I learned one week prior to this event that Bakira would be coming to Canada for the conference. I made plans to go down to Montebello and meet this amazing woman in person. It was impossible to attend the conference, already booked beyond capacity. However, through some glitches that arose, I ended up with the privilege of picking up Bakira at the airport and driving her to Montebello. I also replaced her interpreter Wednesday afternoon at the conference and accompanied Bakira to the breakfast meeting in Ottawa on Thursday, May 26.

Bakira is an incredibly strong and resilient woman. This is what made her become a Bosnian army fighter the minute she and her family could escape their tormentors. But regardless of how tough she is, it's still very difficult for Bakira to tell her story. Yet she does it every chance she gets. The world must not forget what happened during the Bosnian war.

Bringing war criminals to justice has become Bakira's mission. On Wednesday morning, she made a speech at the conference highlighting Bosnian Serb war criminal, Ratko Mladic – one of the three architects of the Bosnian genocide who remained at large (at that point). She asked for everyone's help in bringing this man to justice.

The following morning while driving to Ottawa for the meeting, I got a call informing me of the astounding news of Mladic's arrest the previous evening. I had the honour of being the first to announce this incredible news to Bakira, to her absolute delight. I was also blessed with the privilege of standing by Bakira's side and interpreting for her at the meeting while she made the announcement of Mladic's arrest, news which was greeted by the audience with a solid round of applause.

Bakira ended her announcement and the story of her personal suffering with a request to everyone present to do everything possible to seek the arrest of war criminals being harboured in Canada.

## **In her name: paying tribute to inspirational women**

It's not often we get a chance to pay tribute to the women in our lives who've inspired us. So when The Learning Centre of Vanier College posted an announcement for a writing competition dedicated to inspirational women, it gave me the impetus to write and submit a story.

The announcement for the contest was posted in February, 2011, in honour of the upcoming International Women's Day. Students (and non-students, like myself) were asked to write about an inspirational woman in 250 words or less. The entries that came in were put together and published in a book in May, 2011, titled *In Her Name: Inspirational Women 2011* and registered with Library and Archives, Canada.

Forty entries were chosen for publication. Many contributors wrote about women close to them: mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers – everyday women who've touched the lives of people around them with their great capacity for love and selflessness, and their courage and strength in protecting and helping loved ones in difficult or perilous situations. These incredible women are also often credited with being a source of wisdom – veritable anchors in a world of uncertainty.

Some authors wrote about historical figures – women who have made an important contribution to humanity, leaving behind permanent imprints that will remain visible in the world long after they're gone.

The woman I wrote about – Bakira Hasecic – falls in this category. She survived the Bosnian war and watched her hometown Visegrad, in eastern Bosnia, ethnically cleansed of its majority Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) population in 1992. She was raped. Bakira lost a total of 27 family members during the war.

Together with other survivors of wartime rape, Bakira founded the Sarajevo-based association Women Victims of War. This group provides support to women (and in some cases men) who were victims of mass and systematic rape during the Bosnian war and gathers their testimonies. It also actively pursues the war criminals who committed these rapes and other atrocities. Most of the group's members are Bosniak women, but it also includes Serbian and Croatian women, as well as Bosniak men.

During the war, rape was used by the military as a strategy for ethnic cleansing. The goal was to shame and terrorize victims to the point where they'd never want to return home. Sadly, it worked; to this day, many victims have never returned home, not even for a visit.

Bakira lives in Sarajevo, but often returns to her native Visegrad. She has also encouraged others to return to the towns they were driven out of during the war. And she does everything possible to confront the war criminals in Visegrad. These people have created a culture of impunity for themselves; they're often found in positions of power in this town. But Bakira never misses an opportunity to confront them, loudly and publicly.

Not long after *In Her Name: Inspirational Women 2011* was published, I had the tremendous honour of meeting Bakira in person. And in what turned out to be an incredible twist of fate, this book was what made that blessed event possible. When I e-mailed Bakira to tell her about it, she informed me that she'd be coming to Canada – to Montebello, Quebec – for a three-day conference hosted by the Nobel Women's Initiative – "Women Forging a New Security: Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict." Montebello is less than two hours away from where I live, in Pierrefonds (a Montreal suburb), so there was no way I could miss out on the opportunity to meet this incredible woman. Had I not contacted Bakira at that particular time, I would have missed out on the chance to see her.

In reading the book, I discovered another connection. One of the entries, entitled "Cette femme inspirante" and written by Manoushka Baptiste, is about Nobel Laureate Betty Williams. This amazing woman, known for her efforts to bring peace to Northern Ireland during The Troubles, is one of the six women who founded the Nobel Women's Initiative, the hosts of the conference that Bakira attended.

A coincidence of this nature brings to mind the age-old axiom "it's a small world". Indeed, we're all interconnected, beyond what we realize. And it's this connection to our fellow human beings that should make it unthinkable for us to turn **a blind eye to the thousands of women in the world who have lived through, or are currently experiencing, sexual violence in situations of armed conflict.**

## **Peace and goodwill**

*By Suzana Vukic*

The last weekend of November, I joined Toronto's Bosniak community for their Bosnia and Herzegovina Statehood Day celebrations, as well as for genocide training and research.

I went to Toronto's St-Lawrence Market upon arrival. Christmas trees, fresh holly and evergreen wreaths were for sale, a reminder that Christmas was near. It brought me back to a journey I began a year ago, when I first wrote about the Bosnian war and its aftermath, in my Christmas in Sarajevo piece.

Back then, I remembered the coming July would mark the 15th anniversary of the Srebrenica Genocide. Through a series of events, I wrote about this subject and also accepted an invitation by the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) community of Toronto to join them for their Srebrenica Commemoration Weekend in July. I became acquainted with a community and its sorrow.

Soon afterwards, I was made an honorary member of the international team of experts of the Institute for Research of Genocide Canada (IRGC). This led to my being invited to the genocide training sessions in November.

Bosniaks had additional reason to celebrate. In October, the Canadian Parliament passed the Srebrenica Resolution, Bill M-416, which recognizes the events that occurred in Srebrenica in July of 1995 as genocide ( Prime Minister Harper had previously vetoed this bill).

This gift represents a great moral victory for Canadian Bosniaks. It means their adopted homeland recognizes the suffering that they've lived through in fleeing war-torn Bosnia, and acknowledges that genocide occurred there.

When reading about Harper's veto last summer, I was dismayed. I couldn't believe it didn't make news. So I wrote about it. My involvement went beyond writing about the Srebrenica Genocide to actively lobbying the Canadian government for recognition of it.

I learned a lesson. I have an aversion to politics. Since writing my column for the Hudson/ St.Lazare Gazette the past two years, I realize that politics are a necessary evil. We can't afford to be politically uninvolved. My involvement with the Srebrenica Genocide issue taught me that if you care enough about any political issue to fight for it, you'll achieve your goal.

I knew that genocide training would be daunting. Stuck with a cold, I coughed incessantly throughout the two days of training. But this event was too important to miss. I was grateful for the empathy and understanding extended to me by those present, as well as for the hot tea and delicious bowls of wonderful homemade soup, soothing to my cold.

That weekend, I became reacquainted with the reality of the Bosniak community. Toronto's Bosniak population was small before the war. Its numbers swelled during and after the war. It's a diaspora community, made up of individuals who fled from their homes in horrific circumstances during the war.

Any Bosniak community gathering will include at least one or two, if not several, concentration camp survivors. There will be individuals present who have been tortured, beaten, raped, or harmed in some manner. Some have had (or even witnessed) at least one family member (parent, child, spouse, sibling) killed or harmed. Others have witnessed the death or disappearance of relatives, friends, and community members.

Younger adults remember a childhood or adolescence marked with memories of coming under direct sniper or artillery fire, and of watching the bombardment and destruction of their homes and communities. One man, an out-of-town guest, described watching his home being burnt to the ground. Some community members have had most of their male family members killed. Others were intended victims of "eliticide" – intellectuals and prestigious community members who, because of their elevated status, had their names on a list of people destined for death.

Considering the horrors of ethnic cleansing that they've lived through, all of these people are lucky to be alive. They're also grateful to be living in a safe, democratic country like Canada. But they've never stopped grieving their losses or the homeland left behind.

I've met different people. There's Aldina Muslija and her family, who've graciously welcomed me into their home. There's Zijo Burgic, who was a journalist before the war and has just recently begun to write again in earnest. There's a line of his that's a common refrain in his poetry and prose: Bosnia! Struggle is your destiny!

There's Dr. Emir Ramic, President of the IRGC, one of the first people to welcome me, as a guest, into the Bosniak community. I've met many others. It's important to get to know people, their stories and worldviews.

The Bosniaks I've met are hard-working, contributing members of Canadian society. They're excellent examples of the Canadian-immigrant success story. I'm also surprised at how many individuals have achieved incredible academic and professional success. This seems extraordinary considering the horrors of their wartime past.

Dr. Smail Cekic, Director of the Institute for Research of Crimes against Humanity and International Law University of Sarajevo (affiliated with the IRGC), was an honored guest speaker and lecturer. He was accompanied by honored guest speaker Asaf Dzanic, a journalist from Sarajevo.

Dr. Cekic gave us a questionnaire tool produced by the University of Sarajevo to interview, collect data and official accounts from victims of wartime atrocities (or their next of kin, in cases of murdered victims).

Two different questions pertaining to the type of atrocities committed contain exhaustive lists of the different ways in which victims were harmed.

Besides being killed and injured, other atrocities include: captivity (concentration camps); rape; forced pregnancy; forced displacement of children from one group into another; being maimed; forced deportation; being starved; being burned alive; being used as a human shield; being beaten; being tortured; being forcibly tattooed; plunder; and the destruction or seizure of property (not justified by military needs).

We practiced filling out the questionnaire to learn how it should be done. We were asked to use an example of a victim whose story we were most familiar with.

I had trouble figuring out who to use. Being an outsider (a Canadian-born Croat with no direct ties to Bosnia), I had no such experience. For practice, I used the example of a victim I'd interviewed recently.

My position was unique. Every single other person in that room would have been able to use the example of someone they knew well – family, friend or neighbor. In fact, several people present would have been able to use their own wartime experience as a sufficient example for the purpose of practice.

The questionnaire is designed to make it impossible for respondents to successfully give false or embellished accounts of wartime atrocities. All data is ultimately verifiable. I found this quite gratifying. When confronted with the wretched, ugly reality of wartime suffering, there's still joy to be felt knowing that the light and beauty of truth can come shining through out of a very dark and desolate place.

There was political discussion; a common view was that Bosniaks are in a vulnerable position given the status quo. They appear to be the only group within Bosnia-Herzegovina who wish to hold the country together. Serbs (in the Republika Srpska entity) would prefer to break away and join Serbia; Croats in Herzegovina (where they're a majority) would prefer to join Croatia.

Responsibility for the war and the attempted partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina was discussed. The Republics of Serbia and Montenegro, as well as the Republic of Croatia, were cited as carrying principle blame for the wartime destruction of Bosnia and the near annihilation of Bosniaks.

I knew this was a historic truth, but had trouble with Croatia being assigned the same level of blame as Serbia.

While pondering this, an out-of-town guest, Semir, was asked if he could speak briefly about his experience as prisoner in the Dretelj concentration camp in Herzegovina. His description was bloodcurdling.

Although not mentioned outright, one fact about Semir's captivity pervaded my being: Dretelj was a Croat-run concentration camp.

I always sidestepped this reality, holding Serbs principally responsible for the aggressions in the Croatian, Bosnian and Kosovo wars. I clung to CIA figures citing Serbs with 90% responsibility for Bosnian war atrocities.

But the presence and voice of a single victim demolished all of my constructs.

My physical illness seemed to reflect a moral and spiritual malaise. To be at peace with myself, I sought an opportunity to approach Semir and apologize for what my people had done to him. I explained how I found it hard to stomach the thought of a Croatian man doing harm to innocent Muslims or Serbs.

Semir told me that although Croats alone were responsible for all of his wartime suffering, he's always believed in the importance of Muslims and Croats working together. He spoke of the importance of working through these issues towards a better future.

All of these insurmountable difficulties must be dealt with if Bosnia is to move towards a better future.

It's horrifying to know there are people eager to see Bosnia being split apart again. This would be a disaster – for Bosniaks, and for Serbs and Croats in all corners of this nation.

Equally scary is knowing there are individuals eagerly awaiting another chance at warfare and a redrawing of the map, for the purpose of revenge and the “righting” of historic and recent wrongs. Considering that weekend's topic – genocide – and the fact that Bosnians have yet to come to terms with the horrors that took place less than two decades ago, this scenario must never be allowed to occur again.

It's difficult to envision a solution for Bosnia's troubles. Ideally, discussions on Bosnia's future should include all of its people – Bosniaks, as well as ethnic Serbs and Croats from the region. It's not easy, but must happen.

In order for inclusive discussion to work, all people involved must be decent, respectful individuals, with a firm commitment to human rights, capable of maintaining civility once discussions become heated or impassioned.

Before that weekend ended, Emir invited me, on behalf of the IRGC, to attend the commemoration ceremony and mass burial in Srebrenica-Potocari in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in July, 2011. This will be preceded by a peace march lasting three days and spanning 120 km. It commemorates the perilous route taken by Bosniak men to escape death before the Bosnian Serb army overran the UN-protected enclave of Srebrenica. Many never made it to safe territory.

I'm overjoyed with this great opportunity, hopeful that my work and personal commitments will allow me to be in Srebrenica in July, 2011. Hopefully, I'll have the physical and moral strength for this journey. Regardless of the heartache in store, there will be joy in knowing that men who were destined for death survived and will be present amongst us. People from all of Bosnia's ethnic groups will be present, along with members of the international community, to commemorate the dead and uphold human rights. Despite the difficulties of the past, there will be an opportunity to work towards a better future.

While amongst this community, I greeted people with “selam” – a Muslim salutation meaning peace, in an effort to make myself less of a stranger. I realize this greeting fits with the true meaning of Christmas – peace and goodwill to all humankind.

Those who celebrate Christmas should reflect on the birth of a child that signalled the beginning of redemption for humanity. We feel the need to be generous, and thus overdo it when buying gifts. We donate to charity at Christmastime; this should be a moral obligation throughout the year.

We also need to manifest the sentiment of “peace and goodwill”, in words and deeds. We're all capable of going beyond the comfort zone of our existence and upbringing in order to make this



wish manifest in our world – to recognize the suffering that exists in our world and work towards a better future for all of humankind.