

# REMEMBERING



PHOTO OF HASO HELD BY MUSKA. PHOTO: TOM MADAY

# SREBRENICA

by Patrick McCarthy and Doug Hostetter

**A**s nationalist Serb forces advanced in full-scale attack on the Bosnian city of Srebrenica, Muska Oric hurriedly said goodbye to her husband, Haso. He was headed for the woods, hoping to join a growing column of Bosnian men desperately attempting to flee the United Nations “safe area.” Before he departed, Haso took a gold medallion from around his neck and put it on his son, Elvis, then eight. He kissed Muska and said to her quietly, “Take good care of the kids.” Muska and her four children turned around and made their way quickly to the UN base in the nearby village of Potocari. It was July 11, 1995, the last time they would see Haso.

Ten years ago, over the course of just a few days, more than 7,000 Bosnian men and boys were slaughtered in the worst single act of genocide in Europe since the end of the Second World War. At the same time, 30,000 women and children were permanently expelled from Srebrenica. A judge at The Hague Tribunal, reviewing evidence of war crimes in Srebrenica, described the July 1995 events there as, “Truly scenes from Hell, written on the darkest pages of human history.” Many of those responsible for the genocide in Srebrenica have been brought to The Hague to face trial. Nevertheless, two of the main actors, Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic and his military counterpart General Ratko Mladic, remain free, in spite of their indictment for genocide and crimes against humanity in Srebrenica and other places in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

As we mark the tenth anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, it is important that we not allow the memory of this tragic event to fade. It is especially important that we remember Srebrenica because it fits so uncomfortably into the post-9/11 American view of the world, where all evil is depicted as emanating from the fanatics of only one religious tradition. Srebrenica, where a Serbian “Christian” army and militia slaughtered more than 7,000 civilian Bosniak “Muslim” men and boys, reminds us that fanaticism based in any religious tradition can lead to genocide. Srebrenica also reminds us of the importance of the rule of law and the principle that all people and nations must be held accountable to common standards of international law.

The losses of Srebrenica reverberate today in a thousand places throughout the world. Haso Oric is remembered by his three sisters and brother, who live now in St. Louis, Missouri, among 50,000 Bosnian refugees. It’s one of the largest

exhumed from mass graves and identified using DNA comparisons with blood samples drawn from relatives.

Ethnically-based war of the kind that propelled genocidal violence in the former Yugoslavia pits neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend, and even, at times, family against family. In such circumstances, the normal response is either to join in the hatred and division that fuels such war, or else to search for a way to remain neutral and detached—to not take sides in the hope that, like a terrible nightmare, the conflict will pass by and leave us untouched.

There is another way, perhaps the hardest way of all. That is the way of disarmament. Few of us have the courage and resources to seek disarmed lives. To do so takes special graces that originate outside us.

The scale of violence in places like Srebrenica can easily overwhelm us. The loss is so great that it can seem like an abstraction. Then we remember that each death represents a loss to one family and to one circle of friends. In the particular experiences of each loss, we see something universal. We see ourselves. The things that really matter to us—our families, our friends, our homes, and the memories we create there—are what bind us together in a common humanity. In a world increasingly saturated by violence, the real spirit of disarmament lives there, among our shared sorrows. ■



*Doug Hostetter directed FOR-USA's Bosnian Student Project, which helped more than 160 students escape war zones in the former Yugoslavia to attend school in the United States.*

*Patrick McCarthy served as coordinator for the Bosnian Student Project in St. Louis, Missouri, and is author of After the Fall: Srebrenica Survivors in St. Louis.*

