

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

Issue 1. Srebrenica Five Years On, July 11, 2000



Between 2000 and 2003, AP staff writer Peter Lippman produced a series of dispatches for AP's online newsletter *On the Record* on the efforts of Bosnian Muslims to return home after the war. In this series he writes about the town of Srebrenica, scene of the notorious 1995 massacre. In this first dispatch Peter describes accompanying Muslims on one of their first visits back to Srebrenica, five years after the massacre. Later dispatches will piece together the story of the massacre and its aftermath. Srebrenica has become a symbol of cruelty and genocide, but in this series we also commemorate the courage of those who survived and insisted on returning to their homes against ferocious odds. Their determination stiffened the resolve of Western governments, and triggered an international effort to rebuild Srebrenica.



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From the AP Editorial Desk:

July 11, 2000, marked the fifth anniversary of the massacre of more than 7,000 Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica. On this anniversary, over 50 busloads of displaced Srebrenicans traveled in a convoy back to Potočari, the suburb of Srebrenica that was the scene of their expulsion five years ago. There, Bosnian politicians and international officials joined them in a solemn religious ceremony to remember their dead and missing relatives.

The effort to organize and conduct this commemorative event was subject to obstruction at every step along the way by Serb authorities and, at times, by insensitive international officials as well. Organizers were accused of 'provocation,' 'manipulation,' and 'politicization' of the plight of the survivors. A Serb veterans' organization went so far as to deny that any crime had been committed at Potočari. International and Serb officials concerned with security tried to limit the number of participants to 1,500, instead of the more than 5,000 who wished to attend.

In spite of these obstacles, the convoy and commemorative ceremony were accomplished safely, with no serious incidents. But what was the ceremony for, and what did it accomplish? Are the requirements of the survivors of Srebrenica -- for 'justice and truth,' as they put it -- any closer to being met? Or was the anniversary observation just another occasion for politicians to make 'sincere' declarations of sympathy?

Advocacy Project associate Peter Lippman joined the caravan of returning Srebrenicans and describes the event in this issue of 'On The Record' -- the first in a series reporting on the plight of the Srebrenica survivors. In upcoming issues Peter will recall the fall of Srebrenica through the eyes of survivors. He will also tell the story of the displaced Serbs who are currently living in Srebrenica and will finish up the series with a visit to the nearby village of Sućeska, where the first group of returnees has established a tent settlement.

Meeting the Convoy Organizers: Determination in the Face of Obstacles

On the afternoon of July 11, the leader of the Bosnian Muslim community led a prayer and commemorative service for the victims of the massacre that had taken place in Srebrenica five years earlier. Reisu-l-ulema Mustafa efendi Cerić told thousands of Bosnians gathered at Potočari: 'We are not here to judge, nor to absolve. We are not here to seek revenge, nor to forgive. We are here to show that we have not given up and will not give up on justice. We pray that sadness will turn to hope, that punishment will be just, that a mother's tears will be a reminder, and that Srebrenica will never be repeated again.'

A week before the commemoration at Potočari I went to the northern Bosnian town of Tuzla, to meet with organizers of the event. I wanted to join the bus convoy to Potočari, which would include displaced Srebrenicans from all around the Muslim-Croat Bosnian Federation. When I arrived at the office of Žene Srebrenice (Women of Srebrenica), there were five women there. All had lost most of their family members in Srebrenica.

The office of Žene Srebrenice was lined with cushioned benches, and the walls were covered with newspaper clippings and posters. One read, 'Dutch Tank Runs Over 30 Srebrenicans.'

Another showed women demonstrating, holding signs reading 'Tell Us What Happened To Our Men,' 'We're Looking for Our Disappeared,' and 'Srebrenica: End of the World's Morality.'

Žene Srebrenice represents the families whose relatives disappeared after the fall of Srebrenica in July of 1995. As director Nura Begović put it, the goals of Žene Srebrenice are to 'learn the truth about our disappeared relatives and to get justice and punishment of the war criminals.'

The Srebrenica survivors have received precious little truth or justice to date, as domestic politicians and representatives of the international community occupy themselves with evading responsibility for Srebrenica's fall. In the face of this negligence, the survivors have waited for five years. Occasionally they have blockaded a road or held a demonstration to publicize their plight. But the response has either been silence or, worse, empty declarations of support.

It was in response to this stalled situation that Srebrenicans decided to caravan to the location of the genocide, hold a religious ceremony there, and if possible, lay a foundation stone for a new memorial center.

Žene Srebrenice was part of a seven-group planning committee, headed by Srebrenica municipal councilman Abdurahman Malkić, to organize several days of commemoration of the Srebrenica massacres. The main event was to be the convoy to Potočari on July 11. It was in Potočari that people fleeing Srebrenica and the surrounding villages gathered by the Dutch-manned U.N. base, as Srebrenica fell to the Serbs. There, Serb soldiers under the command of General Ratko Mladić separated out the men and sent them to be executed.

The relatives hoped to lay a foundation stone for a new memorial center on the grounds of a cemetery, where the remains of massacre victims would be buried. Those remains that have been exhumed to date (over 4,000) are currently sitting in storage sites in the Tuzla area, where relatives can go to identify them. Fewer than 100 have been successfully identified. There are still an unknown number of mass graves that have not been exhumed.

The disposition of the remains is an urgent and painful issue for the survivors, as burial in a permanent cemetery would be part of a healing process for them. Nura Begović said, "Some people can go into the tunnel where they are stored, to try to identify their relatives, and others can't bear it. Imagine your son lying in a bag there. Let him be in a grave, where people can visit."

The cemetery is a contentious issue for the Serbs who now control the municipality of Srebrenica, including Potočari. To allow the construction of a cemetery and memorial center would be a kind of acknowledgment that war crimes were committed there. Far from letting this happen, the Serbs have resettled Potočari (formerly an overwhelmingly Muslim town) with their own displaced people and have permitted an Orthodox church to be built there.

Nura Begović expects quicker identification of the bodies in the tunnel in Tuzla, once technology for DNA identification is sent from the United States. As for the cemetery, possession of the grounds has not been legalized -- this issue is being deliberated by a special committee in the Srebrenica municipal assembly. The committee is composed of two Serbs, two Muslims, and an

international supervisor.

The Serb and Muslim sides have each made proposals for a location, but there has been no progress toward an agreement. Nura told me that the Serbs have proposed several remote village sites. Abida, another member of Žene Srebrenice, argued, 'They are suggesting places far from the public eye. But my son was slaughtered there in Potočari. His blood was spilled on that ground, so let him be buried there.'

The several months of negotiations preceding the anniversary were punctuated by disputes between the two sides, with no movement toward an agreement. Serb members of the Srebrenica municipal council were so unwilling to discuss the cemetery's location that they walked out of council sessions several times, and they boycotted the sessions altogether for long periods.

On occasion the Serb councilmen justified their actions by saying that 'important issues such as repair of the water supply' must be resolved first. The Office of the High Representative, which acts as the arbitrating authority for such contentious issues, failed to settle the problem before the commemoration. A week beforehand, members of the organizing committee announced that they would lay the foundation stone, even if it were to be destroyed the next day.

Nura told me, 'The Serbs will never allow us to build the cemetery. Someone must put pressure on them, and only the High Representative can do that.'

Another stumbling block in preparations for the commemoration was the number of buses that would be allowed to travel to Potočari. Originally the organizing committee wanted to bring 10,000 people, or one member of every surviving family from the Srebrenica area. That would have required 200 buses, and the committee quickly reduced the requested number of buses to 100. The Republika Srpska (RS) minister of the interior said that he could not guarantee the safety of this many people and requested that only 15 buses be allowed.

SFOR (U.N. Stabilization Force) agreed and informed the organizing committee that only 15 buses, or 750 people, would be permitted in the convoy. The organizing committee responded that all 100 buses would travel, regardless of SFOR's decision. They questioned how much the problem was truly one of security, and how much it was influenced by the Serbs' desire to minimize the atrocity, or to pretend that it never happened.

Committee leader Abdurahman Malkić asked rhetorically, 'If the international community can't guarantee the safety of 5,000 people who want to return to Srebrenica for a half-hour or 45 minutes, how can they guarantee security for 20,000 returnees?' The issue remained under negotiation.

Contributing to the tension leading up to the commemoration, the (Serb) Srebrenica Veterans' Association wrote a letter in late June to the Republika Srpska National Assembly stating that "no one was even hurt in Potočari, let alone killed," and that the "world media informed the public about how the VRS [Serb] soldiers helped out the old, women, and children to get on buses and safely get to the BH Federation because they did not want to stay in Srebrenica...."

Technically, the first part of this statement was true. No battle took place at Potočari. While some people were killed there, the massacres of over 7,000 people took place elsewhere, out of view of the public. But Potočari -- more specifically the former car-battery factory that was used as the Dutch troops' base during the war -- was the staging area for the expulsion of Srebrenica's Muslims. It was there that men were separated from their families and taken to be killed, while the women and children were put on buses and driven to the border dividing Serb- and Muslim-controlled territories.

The Srebrenica Veterans' Association also charged that the commemoration ceremony is “unnecessary” and could be a provocation. They warned that it could “deepen the disharmony between the two peoples...” Given this, they said the event could lead to “unwanted consequences,” and that the organization wished to “disassociate itself from possible unwanted incidents in advance.”

This veiled threat from the Serb side was sharply condemned by the U.S. Embassy and public figures in the Federation. Planning for the event continued. Finally, on the weekend before the 11th, international officials consented to allow 45 buses on the caravan, and the organizing committee agreed to postpone plans to lay the cornerstone. The buses, coming from numerous locations in the Bosnian Federation, would meet at the Federation town of Kladanj, before departing for the Republika Srpska.

Regarding the possibility of a violent incident during the convoy's trip, Nura said, “I think we will get to Srebrenica safely, because they know we are coming. If not, there will be no Srebrenica, and no return.”

I asked Nura about the purpose of the anniversary commemoration. She explained that the goal was “to go to Potočari, the location of the biggest genocide, and hold a religious ceremony there. We hope that things will be better after the 11th. We are sticking to our ideas. We want to solve the problem of the remains.”

As with all such grassroots efforts in Bosnia, the effort to organize a commemorative event was the target of accusations of manipulation from all sides. Serb politicians in the Republika Srpska said that the commemoration was “politicized” and organized with “dishonest intentions.” Opposition politicians in the Federation accused Žene Srebrenice and similar groups of being SDA (Muslim nationalist party of President Alija Izetbegovic) organizations, and lashed out at the SDA for cynically manipulating the victims.

However, the women struck me simply as mothers in pain. Far from being political operators, they disavowed any party connection. Nura said, “We have nothing to do with political parties. We don't like them. We are looking for humane solutions to our problems.”

The SDA, as the ruling party during the war, was further accused of having “sold” Srebrenica -- a common allegation that never seems to go away. Representatives of the international community -- particularly the United Nations and the Dutch -- were attacked from various sides for having allowed Srebrenica to fall to the Serbs.

Amid this free-for-all of recriminations, many of which were based on some kernel of truth, it was possible to lose sight of a basic question: What do the survivors of Srebrenica need? Their needs can be expressed in concrete terms: They need to know how many of their relatives are missing, and how many are dead. The dead need to be exhumed, identified, and reburied in a public place. As for the living, their survival needs require urgent attention. They need either to return to their reconstructed pre-war homes with a guarantee of security and employment, or be given shelter and a viable means of support elsewhere in Bosnia. And those guilty of the war crimes must be arrested without further delay.

The Convoy to Potočari

At 6:30 on the morning of July 11, I parked my rented car near the field in Tuzla, from where buses were to leave for Srebrenica. I followed a group of women wearing scarves who were crossing the field. At the upper corner two buses were parked. Signs on the bus windows read "Srebrenica Ekspres," and "We Do Not Forget." People were already gathering around the doors, waiting to board.

It was clear that there were going to be far more riders than spaces. I would have to drive to Potočari. I arranged to take some women with me. Hajra, around 60, shook my hand and introduced herself this way: "I lost my only son, and I can't get on the bus..." and started crying. With her was her daughter Munevera, about 40, and a friend, Mrs. Pašalić, who must have been around 70. Mrs. Pašalić began listing the members of her immediate family who were killed and then told me that in all, she lost 45 of her relatives.

Hajra told me, "My son was a policeman, and he disappeared when Srebrenica fell. My husband is here in Tuzla. We have received approval to get our apartment back, and we are waiting for it to be fixed. I'm fighting to go back home, so that Srebrenica doesn't remain ethnically cleansed."

As people waited to board the buses, a busload of French people arrived to join the caravan. Srebrenica survivors crowded around the door of the bus, hoping to get on. Soon a Dutch bus arrived, but it was full. A man asked me for a ride and told me that from his village, only he and one other person had survived. He had lost his father and two brothers. He said, "I can't go to clean my mother's grave in Srebrenica. I can only go like this, with an organized group. Otherwise, it's too risky."

I walked toward the car with my passengers, leaving the loading scene behind. There were at least 200 people who were not going to be able to join the convoy. We left town and headed south for Kladanj, where other buses were going to join the caravan.

As I drove, Munevera told me that her neighbor had moved into her apartment after the fall of Srebrenica. This was not a displaced person, but someone who just wanted a better apartment. That person was evicted two weeks ago and took everything out of the apartment. He took not only the furniture, but the water heater, the electrical switches and outlets, the locks on the doors, and the plumbing fixtures. Munevera added that if he had had more time, he would have removed the parquet floors too.

We arrived at Kladanj an hour before the convoy was to leave for Potočari. As we waited at a porch-front coffee house, buses arrived from Ilidža, Vogošća (suburbs of Sarajevo where many Srebrenicans live), and other parts of Bosnia. People waiting to depart recognized former neighbors they hadn't seen in five years: "Oh, you're from Pozanovići, I know whose son you are..." "Three hundred and sixty people are gone, and that's only one street..." "Where are you living now...Are you going to move back?"

Someone reassured Munevera, "They'll fix everything in your apartment right away, God willing." Munevera said, "But it's going to be different living with them, those animals. Before, I never thought I had enemies. I never knew nor cared, who was a Croat and who was a Serb. But now, it won't be like before. I can have contact with them, but there will be no trust."

Around 60 buses arrived. They were all directed to one large parking lot, where Federation police inspected the buses and their riders. Meanwhile, well-known figures also arrived with their entourage and bodyguards: Prime Minister of the Bosnian Federation Edhem Bičakčić, Social Democrat leaders Sejfidin Tokić and Gradimir Gojer, and others. People asked where Presidency members Alija Izetbegovic and Ante Jelavić were.

The buses began to depart right on time at 10:00. Each bus was numbered and carried a guide and a Federation policeman in plainclothes. I joined the caravan as soon as the police allowed me, behind the tenth bus. We drove toward the border with the Republika Srpska, about 10 kilometers to the east. Munevera said she doubted that there would be any problem on the other side. She told me that her colleagues at work had asked her, "Aren't you worried about going back there?" She answered, "What can happen? Only someone throwing rocks can bother us, or maybe a sniper."

Perhaps Munevera's colleague was thinking of what happened in Bratunac last May. Four buses carrying 200 Muslim women were stoned at the entrance to the town, as they were trying to pay a preliminary return visit. A dozen women were injured. Local Serbs called the bus visit a "provocation," but the mob that attacked the buses had been organized through announcements over the radio. At least one local policeman participated in plainclothes. Bratunac is the largest town between Kladanj and Srebrenica and the last turn en route to Potočari.

Ten kilometers out of Kladanj, a sign read "Welcome to the Republika Srpska." At the borderline, a Muslim and a Serb policeman stood together. A couple of helicopters circled high overhead. As soon as we crossed the border into the Republika Srpska, a policeman with a gray moustache ordered me back. He said, "No civilians can go through in cars. That is the agreement. Go back and get on a bus. If you are a journalist, go back and talk to Tuzla Interior Minister Dautović and get your accreditation."

There was nothing to do but to return to Kladanj. I doubted that there was a Minister Dautović, or if there was, that he could help me. The women went off to try to get on a bus, and I found the Minister after all. He was leaving in a hurry. I asked him for a press pass, and he looked quickly at my card. As much to get me out of his way as anything else, he handed me a large cardboard sign that said, "PRESS." Then he was gone.

I drove back to the border alone. A dozen other cars were in front of me, and many more behind me. As we arrived at the border, all but one of the other cars were turned away. I doubted my cardboard press sign would help me; anyone could have printed it up. But a policeman casually waved me through.

I drove alone through 50 kilometers of Republika Srpska territory. It was wooded and hilly, undeveloped except for an occasional village or farmhouse. Every 100 or 200 meters, a lone Serb policeman stood by the side of the road. I was unsure whether my press sign was a good idea or not, as foreign journalists are not popular in Serb-controlled territory. Soon I caught up with the back of the convoy and drove along with several buses, SFOR armored vehicles, and an ambulance. An RS police car followed behind me, blue lights flashing all the way.

After we passed the town of Vlasenica there were many bombed houses beside the road. Fields of corn, already two meters high, grew between ruined homes. Here and there people stood at the side of the road watching. There were no welcoming waves, nor did I notice particular hostility. Probably they were not pleased to see signs on the buses using the word “genocide.”

I wondered what kind of country all these people, and all these policemen lining the road, hoped for? Did they think they can thrive in an “ethnically pure” territory? I remembered what a Serb driver had told me once, when I was working on an election in the Republika Srpska. He said, “We can never live together again. One day, we will learn to be good neighbors, like France and Germany.” The scenario of separation is looking less and less likely, as displaced people continue to insist on their right to return.

The convoy passed the small town of Kravica. There had been particularly vicious fighting here during the war, and one of the massacres took place here. Helicopters circled overhead. In the bus ahead of me, practically everyone stood up and looked out the window as we passed a large warehouse, where approximately 1,000 people are said to have been killed.

We arrived in Bratunac, a few miles north of Potočari, without an incident. There, it seemed that there were more police on the streets than civilians. SFOR, IPTF (U.N. police), and Carabinieri (special Italian riot troops, deployed to Bosnia a couple of years ago after some violent incidents took place) crowded the streets. But today almost nothing happened in Bratunac. Almost nothing -- later I heard that there was a stoning incident, and one woman was arrested. All I saw, however, was several children giving the three-finger sign, a Serbian nationalist symbol guaranteed to provoke. I took down my press sign.

We made the right turn toward Potočari. This is an industrial “suburb” of Srebrenica, one long road through the hills, with factories on both sides. These factories, if they are working at all anymore, function at ten percent of their pre-war capacity. Here and there was a coffee-house, with displaced Serbs fanning themselves in the 90-degree heat. Between the coffee-houses and defunct factories, there were cornfields and run-down houses.

The temperature in my car rose to 95 degrees F. I passed several defunct factories marking the entrance to Potočari, parked between an IPTF jeep and an armored SFOR vehicle, and headed for the ceremony.

The Commemoration

I walked up to the former battery factory. The grounds in front of the factory were surrounded by empty buses and had been converted into a large prayer field. Altogether over 50 buses had made it through to Potočari.

An elderly woman cried out, grieving at the first sight of the place she had left under oppressive circumstances five years earlier. Helicopters circled over nearby ridges. One woman near me fainted and was fanned by her friends. Mostly, however, the mood was solemn and quiet. Here on this field, mothers and wives had been separated from their sons and husbands; most of them still do not know where their men are.

I climbed onto a small hummock where several people were taking photographs. I saw around 3,000 people lined up to pray -- men in the front rows, and at least twice as many women behind them. Reisu-l-ulema Cerić was giving a sermon and leading prayers, in Bosnian and Arabic. A sea of women in white scarves listened; all repeated "Amin" at the end of a phrase.

I walked down toward the front of the line of praying men. They were raising their hands to their faces in the traditional manner of prayer. Cerić spoke, "We are not here to condemn, but we won't give up on justice. Give us strength, and save us from hate. Give bravery and kindness to those who survived. And for the criminals, give them the strength to change their bad intentions." Behind him I could see Edhem Bičakčić praying. President Izetbegovic was not far away. This was his first time in the Republika Srpska.

Croat member of the Bosnian presidency Ante Jelavić stood near Bičakčić, as did U.N. special representative Jacques Klein. High Representative from the international community Wolfgang Petritsch and U.S. Ambassador Thomas Miller were there, as were many other diplomats. It was unusual for the prayer to be led in the Bosnian language rather than Arabic and for non-Muslims to be welcomed into the prayer line.

It was decent of Jelavić and the diplomats to participate, although it was also a political necessity. The Serb member of the presidency, Živko Radišić, did no such thing. U.S. Ambassador Miller had personally called upon Radišić to attend.

All top Republika Srpska politicians had been invited -- from mayors to members of Parliament - - but none had come, nor had any representative of the Orthodox Church. To do so would have been to recognize that something had taken place at Potočari. Those who even admit this, call it a "tragedy," not a crime. Radišić calls it the "result of a civil war."

Cerić announced, "We have finished. Please go home peacefully now." Bodyguards in black surrounded the public figures, and everyone walked off the field. People approached Alija Izetbegovic and kissed his hand.

I offered some people a ride, and we headed to Tuzla via Zvornik. Outside of Bratunac we came across a small caravan of five or six buses and ten-odd cars. They told us that they had been detained by the police for two hours and asked us whether the commemoration was over. We

advised them to turn around and go back.

Aftermath and Reflections

Perhaps one of the more optimistic declarations after the commemoration was that of Suleiman Garib, Federation Minister for Social Policy and Refugees, who said, "As of today, nothing will remain the same." But what is different? The commemoration was pronounced a success, perhaps because the Serb police had reluctantly but successfully protected the visitors as they came to perform a religious function, and as they left to go back to their "temporary" homes.

As the commemoration took place in Potočari, observances were also held in other parts of the world. Bianca Jagger and Bosnian Ambassador to the United Nations Muhamed Šaćirbey led a symposium on Srebrenica at the United Nations. In Prishtina, Kosovo women marched in solidarity with the Srebrenica women, and similar demonstrations were held in Western Europe.

Politicians around the world were out in full force, making declarations of support. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan expressed his condolences to the families of the victims. The Hague war crimes tribunal promised to increase their investigative effort and to indict more war crimes suspects. On Thursday after the anniversary, the U.N. Security Council observed a minute of silence in memory of the massacre.

Meanwhile, the night before the commemoration, the rebuilt house of Ibrahim Bakalović was torched in Srebrenica -- the fourth such arson in two months. On the 12th, Serb officials held a commemorative ceremony of their own, honoring Serbs who had been killed near Srebrenica by Muslim forces during the war. And the accusations of provocation and politicization of the ceremony continued.

Surprisingly, Republika Srpska Prime Minister Milorad Dodik spoke up at the end of the week with a statement recognizing that a massacre had been committed, and that the survivors had the right to mark the anniversary. This was the first time that a high RS official had so openly acknowledged the crime.

Not all Srebrenicans want to return home. Thousands are already settled in the United States and other countries abroad. Some are comfortable in formerly Serb-owned homes in Vogošća, raising goats and selling fruit in the markets of nearby Sarajevo. Some people say that life with the Serbs would be impossible, and that the international community and the Bosnian government should make it possible for the displaced Srebrenicans to thrive within the Federation, so that they can forget about Srebrenica.

However, there are thousands of survivors who do not have this option. Many people have sworn to me that they will one day return to their home, and that no other place can substitute for Srebrenica. In any case, the question of justice for the victims will never disappear until it is finally redressed. What happened on Tuesday, July 11th, to move closer to that event?

Demonstrations and commemorations do not solve the problems of the Srebrenica survivors, any more than the facile declarations of the international community do. But they at least prevent the

history from being forgotten. Amnesia is the worst enemy of justice. Last week, Srebrenicans bore witness at Potočari, and some international figures accompanied them. That is a first step.

The pressure of the Srebrenicans' desperate needs moves their struggle forward. The "tears of the mother," in the words of Cerić, are perhaps the greatest reminder of these needs. They force the domestic and international politicians, whose rhetoric is not necessarily sincere, to pay attention to their plight. It is not yet clear what will solve the problems of the Srebrenica survivors. But if they remain silent, there will be no help at all.