

**Memory Work in Srebrenica: Serb Women Tell their Stories.**

By

Jagoda Gregulska

Submitted to  
Central European University  
Nationalism Studies Program

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Advisor: Professor Vlad Naumescu

Budapest, Hungary  
2009

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Vlad Naumescu for introducing me to the fascinating field of memory studies and providing me with all the possible encouragement, help, and valuable advice throughout the process of writing. I especially appreciate his excellent questions, which made me look at the topic from a new perspective and try to squeeze as much as possible from the material.

I am very grateful to Mirsad Tokaca, President of the Research and Documentation Centre for assisting me in the process of learning about the violent past of Bosnia, forcing me to learn ‘nas jezik’ and being an inspiration.

Needless to say, I am deeply indebted to all the women of Srebrenica, who were ready to share their stories with me.

## Table of contents

<b>Acknowledgments .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Theories of Collective Memory .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>Collective memory- some theoretical aspects.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Memory and nation.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<b>Landscape of memory in Srebrenica .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Potocari Memorial Centre .....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Serb commemorations .....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>The Serb women reflect on the commemorative arena.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>‘Transparent initiatives’ .....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>The role of the ‘outsiders’ .....</i>	<i>43</i>
<b>Collective memory of Serb women .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<i>Methodology of research.....</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Accounts of war.....</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>Construction of narratives .....</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Transmission of memory .....</i>	<i>62</i>
<i>Conclusions.....</i>	<i>66</i>
<b>Serb Narrative of war .....</b>	<b>68</b>
<i>Vision of war .....</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>The public discourse.....</i>	<i>74</i>
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Endnotes.....</b>	<b>89</b>

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the collective memory of the Serbian women of Srebrenica and its relation to the process of reconciliation on both local and state level. Through analysing, elucidating and deconstructing national and ethnic motifs in the interviews conducted with Serbian women currently living in Srebrenica I identify recurrent patterns of a narrative of the war events. Far from attempting to present the memory of Serbian women as a coherent, homogenous narrative, the paper deconstructs common elements and similarities between individual stories and points towards the influence of the current situation in Srebrenica and the way the war events are remembered, narrated and explained. The paper outlines the politics of memory in Srebrenica, with special focus on the commemoration practices and international engagement in the process. The main finding of the research is that memories of the Serb women are narrated from the perspective of their experience of today's life and to a great extent reflect their sense of stigmatisation, denial of victimhood and perceived injustice. The author argues for an increase in the study of memory of the Serbian population of Bosnia. The argument contends that a more inclusive approach to memory in Srebrenica is a precondition for any sincere reconciliation process to take place.

## Introduction

The study of memory is a fascinating subject in itself. What is however extremely important in this field of research, is its possible application in other areas of interest and social engagement. Margaret Paxson, the author of *Solovyovo: The Story of Memory in a Russian Village* explained that her work on collective memory aimed not only at ethnographic documenting the present-day beliefs and practices of a small Russian village but also, if not foremost, contributing to the debate about the slow pace of changes in contemporary Russia. In other words, studies of collective memory can go far beyond documenting memory itself and can provide a new perspective on various processes taking place in society today. By investigating the collective memory of war of the Bosnian Serb women and the “memory arena” in Srebrenica in general, this paper contributes to the question of the pace and prospect of reconciliation process in Bosnia.

The objective of this thesis is to examine the way memory of Serb women in Srebrenica is being shaped and constructed. In the course of this paper, I outline the most relevant elements of the relation between the commemorating politics in Srebrenica, every day life experience in the town and the way the Serb women tell the story of war. This thesis therefore addresses the question of how the personal experiences of women (both during and after the war) influence the way they perceive the war events and how the public discourse influences the way they narrate their personal experience. I am interested in what frameworks and points of references they use and how the memory of war is transmitted to younger generations.

The 1992-1995 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (from now on Bosnia) is widely considered the bloodiest and most violent conflict in Europe since the Second World War. After declaring independence from Yugoslavia, a fierce struggle for territorial control ensued among the three major groups in Bosnia: Bosniaks (commonly known as 'Bosnian Muslims'), Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats. While Bosnian Muslims tried to maintain the country as a unitary republic and homeland to

its three ethnic groups, Serbs, who first opposed disintegration of Yugoslavia, then opted for dissolution of Bosnia into ethnically driven entities (Wagner 2008). Croats eventually shared the Serb vision. As a result, a very violent war raged in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995, when the fighting was brought to end by the Dayton Peace Agreement. Effectively, Bosnia continues as one country, but divided into two semi-autonomous entities: Federation and Republika Srpska (RS).

Everything from the motives, character, events to interpretation of the war in Bosnia has been disputed by the conflicted sides. The only consensus between the three different nations in regard to the violent past comes down to blaming it on foreign powers. But here again, Muslims and Serbs blame international community for different acts or their lack. Therefore, thirteen years since fire ceased, almost everything about the war is contested by one or the other community.

In this picture, Srebrenica holds a special place. For Bosniaks, and the world, systematic, ordered and organised killing of over eight thousand Muslim men and boys become a symbol of the crimes committed by the Serb forces on the Muslim population of the country. It is also an emblem of failure of the international community to prevent the biggest massacre since the Holocaust from happening in Europe. Again, “Never again”, promised at the end of the Second World War proved to be nothing more than an empty slogan.

In 2003, in the unanimous ruling "Prosecutor v. Krstic", the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), ruled that the Srebrenica massacre was an act of genocide. (ICTY Prosecutor v. Radislav Krstic 2004) This was confirmed in the International Court of Justice judgment "Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro"(ICJ 2007).

Srebrenica, while being the most symbolic and known episode of the Bosnian war is also the most contested one. Although in 2003, the government of the Republika Srpska, under strong pressure of the international community, officially acknowledged genocide in Srebrenica (Krilic 2004), both the nature and scale of the crime remain highly negated by the Serb population. Similarly, there is no agreement about the nature and scale of the attacks on the Serb villages in the Srebrenica municipality conducted by the Muslim forces from 1992 to 1995. From the Serb

perspective, these were unjustified attacks on civilian population and as such occupy an important place in the national narrative of the war. The Muslim side explains them as counter-attacks on the positions of Serb forces.

The accepted facts related to the events of July 1995 are that when, in early 1992 Serb military and paramilitary forces gained control of Srebrenica for several weeks, killing and expelling Bosniak civilians. In May 1992, Bosnian government forces under the leadership of Naser Oric recaptured the town. At that stage, the Serb population of the town fled to the nearby Serb-controlled town of Bratunac or neighboring Serbia. Only few dozens of Serbs stayed in the town. Thousands of Muslims from many smaller towns and villages fled attacks of the Bosnian Serb forces and sought protection in Srebrenica. The overpopulated town suffered from daily shelling, hunger, lack of medicine, electricity or running water. In April 1993, Srebrenica was declared a 'safe heaven'- an enclave under protection of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) and was officially demilitarised. Both sides violated the 'safe heaven' agreement.

On July 11, Bosnian Serb forces, led by Ratko Mladic entered the town. This resulted in a mass exodus from the enclave and; over 8,000 Muslim men and boys were killed or went missing. Muslims refer to this date as 'fall of Srebrenica'. In Serb discourse it functions as 'liberation' of the town.

From a municipality known for its prosperity and comfortable life before the war, Srebrenica turned into an underdeveloped region, which until today faces every aspect of the legacy of a violent conflict: reconstruction of houses, high levels of unemployment and poor infrastructure. Since signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, in December 1995, the slow process of return of the population begun. The municipality was first inhabited only by the Serbs- both pre-war population and those who moved there from Federation, which is now perceived as Muslim-Croat entity. In 2000, the slow process of return of the Muslim population was initiated.

Despite the process of returning and due to the war-time human losses, the ethnic composition of the municipality will probably never reflect the situation from 1991. With a population of just

over 37,000, Bosniaks were the ethnic majority, with 73 percent (27,118) of the total population; Bosnian Serbs made up 25 percent (9,380) (UNHCR Representation to Bosnia-Herzegovina 2006 p. 3). It is difficult to talk about the exact numbers of the population today as there was no census organised after the war. Estimates in 2006 talked about little over 10 000 people, of which approximately 469 are Bosniaks returnees (ibid.). From a predominantly Bosniak town, Srebrenica now has a Serbian majority. It is the only town in Republika Srpska with a Muslim mayor as until today elections in the municipality are organised on the base of population registered there in 1992.

Srebrenica has been a subject of substantial studies, investigations and research projects. Much has been published about the war's events, especially about the genocide committed in July 1995 (Honig and Both 1996, Rhode 1997, Rief 1996, Cigar 1998, Gutman 1993, Woodhead 1997, Power 2003 to name only a few). Those journalistic accounts, historical researches and legal discussions focused primarily on the experiences of the Muslim population of the enclave, with Serbs present for the most part as perpetrators of the crimes (Sudetic 1998, Suljagic 2005).

That there are competing claims, competing symbols, and competing discourses in Bosnia is a given. Rather than providing verification of the historical narrative from which symbolic discourses arise, this thesis focuses on *Serbian collective memory*, its inner workings and possibilities.

Srebrenica has become an object of memory studies. While there has been significant research into the memory of the Muslim population in Bosnia and some books especially paid attention to accounts of women in Srebrenica (Leydesdorff 2009, Zene u Crnom 2006, Wagner 2007), little attention has been carried out as to the memory of Bosnian Serbs. What comes as a surprise is that given the wide international engagement in the commemorating practices in Srebrenica, very little material provides an overview, description and analysis of the memory work there. Several publications mention commemorative practices (Henrich Boell Foundation 2005), but to my knowledge, only one author provides an analytical look at the dynamics of the local politics of memory (Duijzings 2007). The aim of this thesis is to address these lacunas of research



in the field of memory studies in Srebrenica by contributing with analysis of the collective memory of the Serb women, focusing especially on the influence of the current commemorating practices on the way individual and collective memories are shaped.

In order to fully understand the work of memory in Srebrenica, it would be useful to record, describe and theorize the dynamics of individual and collective memory from the perspective of those who do not appear in the dominant, 'top-down' historical and political analyses. Focusing attention on ordinary people and marginalised segments of society, giving voice to their views rather than denying them agency could contribute significantly to comprehension of the collective memory.

This thesis builds on field work conducted in Srebrenica in April 2009. It consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with Bosnian Serb women and participant observations. Interviewees were encouraged to talk about their personal experiences from the war and to share their understanding of the war events. A discourse analysis of the primary source material will therefore be carried out from the perspective of collective memory studies, informed especially by the works of Maurice Halbwachs, Connerton and Peter Burke. The second source of information comes from media reports, interviews with local media, publications of local and international organisations and scholars.

For this particular research, Bosnian Serbian women were chosen for several reasons. First, it is the least studied segment of population in Srebrenica. Whereas Serb men are often talked to in the context of crimes committed and are usually approached as perpetrators, Serb women are neglected. Secondly, women play a significant role in the process of transition of memory as they spend most of the time with children and they pass on knowledge and explanation of past events. Women are traditionally those who mourn, and often- especially after wars- those who are left as many men die. At least half of the women I have interviewed lost husbands, brothers or fathers during the war or were divorced.

In the context of Srebrenica, selection of Serb women had an additional meaning. This is because since 1995 a group of Muslim women play a very significant role there, mainly as members and representatives of victims' organisations. Such Muslim women victims organisations as Mothers of Srebrenica and Women of Srebrenica became emblematic for the place and have to some extent seized the gender discourse. World wide famous, extremely outspoken and politically active *Mothers* and *Women* of Srebrenica stand only for those of Bosniak ethnicity. In these circumstances, Serbian women are excluded from the picture. As a result, and this has been widely proved by in the research, they construct their stories and position themselves in relation to the Muslim women.

As term '*Women of Srebrenica*' tends to be understood as Muslim women, so did *memory* in the context of the war in that region turn to stand for Bosniak memory. Widely advocated *Never Forget Srebrenica* (motto promoted on t-shirts and souvenirs sold at the Memorial Centre) first and foremost means never forget genocide committed there in July 1995. It may also refer to the siege of the town carried out by the Bosnian Serb army but never to Serb civil victims.

Consequently, involvement of the international community in commemorating practices in Srebrenica comes down to very strong support and engagement in the commemorative practices of the Bosniak population but simultaneously neglecting the Serb side.

Srebrenica became an emblematic place both for Bosnia and Europe. It is widely associated with the worst crime committed on the continent since the Second World War. In this context, commemorations of genocide turned in what Duijzings calls *acts of remembrance meant for international consumption* (2007 p. 160) Similarly, memory and commemoration with time became included as one of the soft tools of transitional justice, that is a set of actions aimed at helping societies to deal with the past of mass scale human rights abuses. In this respect, documenting memories and commemorating victimhood is considered as a matter of *symbolic justice* offered to the victims. By voicing memories of the suffering and assuring validation of their grief, it is expected to support reconciliation with their pain as well as to provide a basis for reconciliation of

the divided community. This cannot be better illustrated than by the establishment of the internationally sponsored Memorial Center in Potacari, Srebrenica municipality, where since 2003 on every July 11 bodies of Muslim victims of genocide are buried. Similarly, since the 2007 Week of Memory is organised in Srebrenica with the aim of commemorating the war events.

These and other attempts of both international and local actors contribute to what I call 'politics of memory', where memory became employed in an agenda of desired reconciliation of the local community. One of the aims of this paper is to examine how these practices impact both the construction of memories of the Serb population of Srebrenica and the expected reconciliation of the local community. Srebrenica has turned into arena of commemorations while no attempts of self-reflection of those attempts could be found. Although it may be presumed that those internationally supported, but still locally initiated commemorations are desired and welcomed by the Muslim population, there has been no study done about their impact on the Serb members of the local community. Paradoxically, international community while promoting reconciliation and overcoming ethnic divisions in Bosnia, shaped the commemorating policy in Srebrenica in ethnic categories. On the one hand, there is the talk about 'victims without national prefix', on the other hand, representatives of international organisations and foreign states participate in commemorations of victims of only one ethnic group, while utterly ignoring the Serb side. On July 11<sup>th</sup>, the day of Muslim commemorations, Srebrenica is full of visitors. The day after, when Serbs commemorate their victims, Srebrenica is empty. Monopoly of public remembering belongs to Bosnian Muslims.

The aim of this paper is not to provide moral judgments of the one-side involvement of the international community in the memory politics in Srebrenica but to analyse their impact on the ways in which local community, in this case, its Serb segment reflects on their war experiences and constructs the narrative of the past.

Most importantly, what are the consequences of this process? What is the importance of collective memory? In the debate about the causes of the last violent wars in the Balkans, history

and historical memory are quoted as one of the reasons for the explosion of conflicts. Far from reducing the causes of the conflicts to such simplistic explanations, I agree that memories of previous wars and the way they are shaped and passed on to new generations have an impact on peace in the region. For this reason, I was interested in how the Serb population remembers and narrates the story of the last war. How do they explain it? What myths are being created and how do people, who did not experience the war personally, learn about it? What is omitted and what remains silenced in the Serb story of Srebrenica and what is given most importance? Can one speak of a coherent national narrative?

This thesis consists of five parts. In the first chapter I summarise some definitions and theoretical aspects of collective memory and memory studies. I present the most relevant theories of memory dynamics and the modes of construction of memory. Then I outline a few important points about national myths and the process of myth creations. This is followed by a short description of the relationship between the collective memory and the studies of ethnicity and nationalism.

The second chapter consists of a description of the activities in the field of commemorations in Srebrenica with a special emphasis on the international involvement. In this part I present the main commemorating events, their aims, structure and importance. Much attention is paid to the Memorial Centre in Potocari and the annual commemorations held there. Consequently, I juxtapose this event with the activities of the Serb population, providing a map of Serb places of memory.

In the fourth chapter I focus specifically on analysis of the interviews with the Serb women conducted during the field work in Srebrenica. I intend to identify the common patterns and ways in which their memories are constructed. The chapter illustrates motifs and elements repeated in most of the narratives as well as points towards relationship between personal memories of women and the collective and national discourse included in their stories. I attempt to sketching what I call a national narrative of the past which is based on the vision of the war presented by my

interlocutors.

This thesis concludes with reflections on the memory work in Srebrenica and suggestions for future research, especially in the field of Serb memory in Bosnia, which has been widely neglected. In the last chapter, I come back to the relationship between collective memory, commemorations and process of reconciliation. I argue for more inclusive memory politics where memories of Serb women would also be given space for expression. Only this way, a process of constructing alternative, conflicting national accounts of the past, where facts are often distorted and manipulated can be reduced

## Theories of Collective Memory

In the course of this chapter, I will briefly outline some key theoretical underpinnings of “collective memory” in contemporary social anthropology, specifically those which relate to memory of war and question of guilt. This will be followed by a brief overview of the relationship between memory and nation and concluded with remarks about the methodological challenges in the field of memory studies.

### ***Collective memory- some theoretical aspects***

Since Maurice Halbwachs, scholars tend to agree that individuals remember in a social context and that it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. Halbwachs (1992) argued that memories are constructed by social groups: it maybe individuals who remember in the literal, physical sense, however, it is social groups which determine what is 'memorable' and also how it will be remembered. Therefore, the very distinction between individual and social memory is problematic and memory is no mere byproduct of group existence but its very lifeblood. The crucial point here is that “collective memory” implies a “shared memory” *about* (not necessarily *of*) those historical events, norms, and perceptions as they converge and coalesce in commonality for the entire group. As such, “collective memory” provides a *social framework* where individual memories are conceived, shaped, and interpreted (1998, pp.41-51). Consequentially, Brunner (2001 in Brockmeier 2002) argued that individual memory appears only at first sight really 'individual'. Upon closer scrutiny, we find it 'distributed' in the same way one's knowledge and one's self is distributed 'beyond' one's mind (p.25). Therefore, *group* appears to be the key concept in understanding memories of individuals.

This overtly ‘society-oriented’ conception of collective memory has been criticized by Maurice Bloch (1998), who has emphasized the reciprocal relationship between autobiographical and collective memory – ‘collective memory’ being shaped significantly by subjective, cognitive

interpretations.

This thesis will primarily build on the tension between the individual and the collective in the construction of memory. Without rejecting Halbwach's and Brunner's notion that the group is a key concept for understanding memory work, I agree with Bloch, that the individual's experience and repository of subjective impressions play as significant a role in the process of memory shaping as the frameworks shared by the group do. Therefore, in the analytical part of this paper, the narratives presented by the women are examined with the objective of identifying the two directions of influence: how collectively shared frameworks provide templates of interpretations of the individual's experience and how this experience validates or undermines the collective narratives.

The concept of “landscapes of memory”- social or cultural circumstances which can trigger both recollection and/or re-articulation introduced by Laurence Kirmayer (1996) serves as a useful analytical tool in describing the conditions under which the processes of remembering and recalling take place. For Kirmayer this concept is especially useful in describing how both individual and collective memories of traumatic events are articulated through narrative, while being crucially mediated and negotiated (p.191). Kirmayer additionally stresses the need to look beyond the purely psychological explanations of how traumatic memories are internally mediated, and towards how shared, socially constructed “landscapes of memory,” provide not only a social context for recollection and remembrance, but a crucial forum for re-contextualization and re-articulation for *both* the individual and the group. According to Kirmayer, memories are most vividly accessed and developed when they fit appropriate cultural, social templates and have a “receptive audience.” (ibid. p.189). A similar approach is advocated by Keneth Gergen (in Neisser 1994) who proposes social constructionism, a position in which “accounts of memory” gain their meaning through their usage, not within the mind, nor within the text but within social relationship. Groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localised.

What I find particularly useful in Kirmayer's "landscapes of memory" is the fact that this term encompasses not only the activities and interpretations of the past consciously organised or planned with the aim of shaping or controlling memories of individuals (the question of who and why wishes to have power over memories is addressed in the paper) but- as a landscape, it includes all the elements of the reality accessible to individuals, also those which challenge, deny or neglect their personal experiences and recollections. Therefore this concept best serves to describe the situation in Srebrenica, where different forces, agents and elements of reality influence the way memory is being shaped.

A more purpose-driven description of collective memory was presented by Paul Connerton (1989). When talking about mental and material spaces of the group he argues that

For the kind of association that makes possible retention in the memory is not so much one of the resemblance or contiguity as rather a *community of interests and thoughts*. It is not because they are similar that we can evoke them; it is rather because the same group is interested in those memories, that they are assembled together in our minds. (p.37)

In this way, one could imagine that the 'memory agenda' of a group or its elites, frames the memory of individuals. What and how is being remembered by a person to a significant extent reflects the trends in the society to which he or she belongs. Individuals tend, consciously or unconsciously, to modify or adjust their memories of the past to the dominant understanding of the past. This modification can be developed in different ways- individuals can adjust personal stories to the dominant political framework of interpretation (if they agree with it) by presenting their memories in a way that they fit in, complement and confirm the agreed vision of the past. They can also tell their stories in a way that they absolutely contradict or challenge the dominant discourse, this approach can be somehow showed in the 'Kundera paradigm', an assumption that parallel to official memory, imposed by the elites and governments, there is an alternative, personal memory of individuals that often consists of a totally contrary narrative (Esbenshade, p.195).

Burke (1989) argues that official and unofficial memories of the past may differ sharply and unofficial memories, which have been relatively little studied, are sometimes historical forces in their own right. He believes that "Without invoking social memories of this kind, it would be hard



to explain the geography of dissent and protest” (p. 107). This is a very relevant point which to a great extent describes motivation behind this research project. It is exactly the wish to explore memories of the segment of the society which has not been given, nor has claimed, much agency in the public discourse in Srebrenica that drives this analysis. At the same time however, it needs to be stressed that in the case of Bosnia, Burke's categories of official and unofficial memories (or the concept of 'Kundera paradigm' for that matter) may not necessarily neatly reflect the divisions in Srebrenica as at least two versions of 'official memories' can be identified there: Serb and Bosniak. In this sense, while personal memories of the interviewed women may stand in contradiction to the war narrative advanced by the Bosniak side, they can, at the same time, fit into the version of the past advocated by the Serb side. Sometimes it is claimed that there is yet a third narrative of the past in Bosnia- the one promoted by the international community. This shows that even the categories that at the first side appear unproblematic can in reality lead to oversimplification and result in blurring of the many nuances of memory work.

### Past, present and power

One aspect of memory studies which is certainly important in this research is what I call a “Triple P”: a triad of past, present and power and the relationship between those elements.

Connerton (1989) argues on the first page of “How Societies Remember”, that control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power. And indeed the relationship between individual and collective memory is hardly ever an innocent one. The importance or influence of a group in the process of remembering goes further than providing frameworks. Collective memory can be changed and modified by institutions- guards of collective memory. As Connerton (1989) points out:

Concerning memory as such, our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. We will experience our present differently in accordance with the different pasts to which we are able to connect that present. Hence the difficulty of extracting our past from our present: not simply because present factors tend to influence – some may want to say distort- our recollections of the past, but also because past factors tend to influence, or distort, our experience of the present. (p.2)

Presentism assumes that memory and images of the past are produced in the present for present purposes and hence are indices not of anything that happened in the past and its effect on the present, but of the structure of needs and interests of the present (Olick 2007, p.8). Already Halbwachs (1992) asserted that in recollection, we do not retrieve images of the past as they were originally perceived, but rather as they fit into our present conceptions, which are shaped by the social forces that act on us. The past is not preserved but it is reconstructed on the basis of the present.

Burke (1989) argues that it is important to ask the questions: what are the modes of transmission of public memories and how these modes changed over time; what are the uses of these memories, the uses of the past, and how have these uses changed; what are the uses of oblivion? Put differently, who wants whom to remember what, and why? (p.107) Whose version of the past is recorded and preserved? The questions of memory and power often lead to underlining dichotomy and differences in remembering. Burke recommends that, given the fact that social memory, like individual memory, is selective, we need to identify the principles of selection and to note how they vary from place to place or from one group to another and how they change over time (ibid.). Memories are malleable, and we need to understand how they are shaped and by whom. Connerton (1989, p.39), advises that to study the social formation of memory is to study those acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible.

In a similar sense, as Edward Said writes, ‘collective memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which the past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning.’ (2000, p.185) Indeed, as we shall see, the ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ memory of these events, manifested in both historical and contemporary Bosnian discourse, presents a paradigmatic case of how collective memory is ‘maintained’ as such, and likewise ‘endowed with political meaning’ in contextualizing and negotiating exigencies of the present. Particular to the Serbian case though is the extent to which collective memory of these events is almost always constructed in opposition to the narrative advanced by the Muslim side.

## Facing the difficult past

Ashplant, Dawson and Roper (2000) argue that when it comes to remembering war, there is a complex entanglement between public and private commemorating, as well as official and personal, hegemonic and sectional. Individual experience is often rendered meaningful only through pre-existing 'templates', that is myths, tropes and dominant narratives, including those of a nation-state. Similarly, grief, being far from being 'outside' the sphere of politics, is often framed in pre-existing narrative forms. For these reasons, it can be manipulated and mobilised with ease. The authors also point out that the politics of war commemorations often is also linked to the issues of social exclusion and modification of the official regimes of historical truth, for example, through the creation of counter-monuments.

The authors advance the idea of a 'commemorative arena', in which there are different issues at stake for those caught up in it, and where outcomes are not decided in advance. This also means that their war memories are 'managed' differently by the various actors, depending on their own war experiences, political objectives and interests. What is common to all these perspectives is that they are selective: they remember some episodes while concealing or forgetting others. According to Connerton (1989)

It is possible to imagine that the members of two quite different groups may participate in the same event, even so catastrophic and all-engulfing an event as a great war, but still subsequent memories of that event, the memories they pass on to their children, can scarcely be said to refer to the 'same' event. (p.20)

Similarly, Piere Nora, after Maurice Halbwachs emphasised that “memory is blind to all but the group it binds- there are as many memories as there are groups” (1989, p.8).

This is very true in the case of Bosnia. One of the characteristics of post-war Bosnia is that there is a wide gap in the terms of how Muslims and Serbs perceive and remember the last war. Though very similar in style and rhetoric, most Muslim and Serb accounts of the war tell completely different stories, documenting suffering among members of their own nation, while ignoring victims of the other 'side'. Consequently, in Srebrenica both communities developed

separate commemorative practices.

The importance of remembering- be it individual or collective derives strongly from its relation to identity. As Michael Roth (cited in Klein, p. 135) put it “In modernity memory is the key to personal and collective identity...the core of psychological self”. If narrative is a constitute of identity, an instrument of politics and an expression of culture, what happens when an organisation- small or large, family, social movement, or nation-state- cannot tell such stories in an unproblematic fashion? Can, as Burke (1989) asks, groups, like individuals, suppress what is inconvenient to remember? If so, how do they do it? (p. 109).

In Germany, Bosnia or Poland the past poses unique problems. Facing the past in these places automatically brings about questions of responsibility, guilt and moral judgments. It also challenges the moral basis of the identity of groups, to which particular roles in the past are being ascribed. Olick (2007, p. 15) claims that collective remembering, by implication, is tied into the deepest dimensions of moral order, though as always this is understood as an order in time rather than a transcendental structure. In making sense of the tragic, difficult past, the fact that individuals are offered particular schemes and templates of interpretation gains even more significance. Ewa Wolentarska- Ochman (2006), summarising her research on the collective memory of the Second World War in Poland, stresses that “collective memory is first and foremost the memory of a group (ethnic, religious, territorial), which, if suppressed and left “unspoken”, can have a negative impact, not only on the group, but also on its relationship with the outside world” (p. 175). On the other hand, authors like Wolf Kansteiner (2002) points out, that although it might make sense to argue with Freud that an individual's failure to work through his or her past results in unwanted symptoms of psychological un-health and that it is impossible to repress the past without having to pay a psychological price for this repression- on the collective scale, especially the scale of larger collectives, such assumptions are misleading. Nations *can* repress with psychological impunity; their collective memories can be changed without a 'return of the repressed' (p. 186).

In my view, either position is overly simplistic and does not seem to have been convincingly argued neither by Wolentarska-Ochman nor by Kansteiner. It seems that the point made by Wolentarska-Ochman (and based on her research conducted in the Polish town Jedwabne) represents more of a moral desire than a scientifically proven observation. It may be desired that groups address their difficult pasts (in the context of Bosnia this postulate is made especially strongly by actors involved in shaping the transitional justice processes) and one can imagine that this can contribute to a “healthier society”, however leaving certain elements of the past unspoken in reality constitutes part of every nation-building exercise. As Renan put it a long time ago, ‘forgetting and historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation’ (1999:145). Similarly, the example of modern Spain, which successfully accomplished transition from brutal dictatorship to consolidated democracy basing the process on 'pacto del olvido' (pact of forgetting) shows, that it is possible to leave difficult memories unspoken. At the same time however, one could argue that first of all, the memories of a violent past shoveled under the carpet may always strike back in the future and one never knows when the uncomfortable past will be used for political purposes. Equally, it is difficult to define levels of 'health' of a nation and decide at which stage 'psychological impunity' mentioned by Kanstainer is gone. These questions are certainly extremely relevant in the Balkans, where it has been argued, the unsettled violent past played a role in inflaming new conflicts. It seems however, that framing a question in a simple ‘yes-no’ opposition does not provide us with a useful analytical tool.

## ***Memory and nation***

Few fields of study have embraced the concept of collective memory as eagerly as nationalism studies. Anthony Smith (2002, p.15) defined nation as a 'named human population sharing historic territory, common *myths and historical memories*' a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.” Eric Hobsbawm talked extensively about the importance of “invented traditions”, and commemorations that lay at the bottom of the nation-building attempts and use history as a legitimator of action and cement of

group cohesion. Renan elaborated on the relation between nation and collective memory by underlining that “suffering in common unifies more than joy does. Where national memories are concerned, grieves are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort” (1999, p.145) Pierre Nora, in his extensive work about the collective memory in France, focused his attention precisely on the relation between *lieux de memoir* (“places of memory”) and the nature of the French nation. These few examples illustrate the preoccupation with memory in the field of studying nations and ethnicity.

This ‘marriage’ of memory and nation has two kinds of implication for the research presented in this thesis. First of all, it emphasises the importance of collective memory in the nation building process and as such can be observed throughout the shared narrative of war in Srebrenica and the way it is constructed around the concept of nation.

The second implication is however more problematic. Since the existence of a shared/collective memory became considered as a precondition for talking about a nation or an ethnic group, in the process the concept of collective memory was somehow hijacked by the notion of nation. Put differently, when a certain event that is a subject of study (such as war in Srebrenica) involves actors belonging to different national groups, it is often automatically presumed that the division line between conflicting memories will run along the lines of ethnic divisions. Although this is often and to a great extent true, this is not the only possible situation. Why is it assumed that certain people will remember a particular event in a specific, coherent way only because they belong to the same ethnic or national group? And how coherent does a narrative of such an event have to be in order to be considered a collective memory? Can people of different national backgrounds, who experienced the same event differently, be considered as sharing a memory of it? It appears that even broadly different memories of individuals belonging to the same national group will be more easily considered as collective memory than memories of an ethnically mixed community who went through an experience (having played different roles) and have less conflicting accounts of what happened. The point made does not attempt to ignore the fact that

collective memory (especially of such violent conflict as show by the research in Srebrenica) often coincides and reinforces itself with the national identity. The remark aims more at warning against the reification of ethnic boundaries and locking the collective memory within. By doing so, one can easily ignore other categories which could be employed in memory studies (eg. gender, belonging to a community, being a victim etc.) The alert about reification has been eloquently expressed by Rogers Brubaker who warns against reification of ethnic boundaries or “groupism”, which he defines as the ‘tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogenous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life’ (2004, p.164). According to Brubaker, ‘ethnicity’ belongs to our empirical data, not the analytical tool kit and it is a key part of what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things with. In this light, the methodological challenge amounted to the fact that by deciding to interview women of Serbian ethnicity I was somewhat contributing to the enhancement of ethnic boundaries. At the same time, while researching any topic related to ethnic or national belonging, it is very difficult to avoid operating with those terms and categories. Brubaker argues that analysts should try to account for the ways in which-and conditions under which- the practice of reification and crystallisation of group feeling can work (2004, p.167). In this sense, approaching the problem from the perspective of collective memory can contribute significantly as it can point towards those moments when ethnicity is being mobilised. At the same time, one has to be aware of the danger of reifying collective memory. Jeffrey Olick (2007) in his study of memory work in Germany admits that that collective memory is not identical to the memories of a certain percentage of the population but constitutes a social fact in and of itself. However, he also warns that we need to be very careful about the transcendentalism implied by this formulation and of reifying THE memory as an entity. “The memory is not an agency of storage but a more active process of construction and reconstruction in time.” For Olick, it is neither a thing nor merely a tool but mediation itself not (p. 10).

At the same time, Olick warns that one should be aware of the challenge posed to the field of collective memory: to find a way to talk about the process of social remembering in such a way

that does not oppose individual and collective memory to each other. Olick contrasts two approaches: the one of *collected memory* and *collective memory* (ibid. pp.23-33). The fundamental presumption of the collected memory approach is that individuals are central. Only individuals remember, though they may do so alone or together and any publicly available commemorative symbols are interpretable only to the degree to which they elicit a reaction in some group of individuals. One advantage of 'collected' memory approach is that it often assumes a posture of behaviorist neutrality that makes the object of study hypothetical rather than categorical. In other words, collected memory approaches do not necessarily begin by assuming the existence of a collectivity which has a collective memory- though they often begin in this way- but instead use the inquiry to establish whether or not the colloquial collective designation is or is not salient. Treating collective memory as well as collective identity, in this way thus resists the deliberate or unintentional adaptation of certain ideological categories, particularly those that make demands on the individual (e.g., nationalism).

These three elements: close relationship between nation and memory; warning against reification of national boundaries as well as reification of collective memory itself and the 'collected memory' approach informed the preparatory stage of this research insofar as they brought valuable concerns in approaching the interviewees as a homogenous, bounded group capable of presenting a coherent national narrative.

The task of researching collective memory of an ethnic or national group presents itself with a number of problems and challenges, this is further complicated if the past in question may challenge the moral basis of the nation.

I am conscious of the importance of the circumstances and setting in which memories were shared. The presence of a researcher, a foreigner and the specific setting of being interviewed must have influenced what and how it was being told. First, individuals tend, consciously or unconsciously, to modify or adjust their memories of the past to the dominant understanding of the past. As Helena Pohlandt-McCormick (2000) found out during her research about violence in



Soweto, interviewees tend to 'talk back', placing themselves in relation to the larger collective memories. This could have twofold consequences for this research. Those interlocutors who have not spoken a great deal about the Muslim victims might have done so not because they were not aware of the scale of their suffering, but because they saw their role as defenders of the Serbian case and felt that they need to present the experience of the Serb population. At the same time, those women who spoke of the losses of the Bosniak population might have done so in order to make an impression of decent and compassionate human beings. These certainly oversimplified assumptions do not aim at underestimating the sincerity of the interlocutors, but rather point toward the difficulty of accessing memories as such. Memory is accessed by stories told, but - stories may change depending on the context in which they are being told. Hence, the very presence of the researcher means, that what is being presented is not necessarily exactly the same as what is being shared 'behind the closed door.' This certainly does not mean that two, completely different narratives are available for 'internal' and 'external' use. It is rather to underline the nuances of the process of investigating memory and its limitations.

Presenting numerous, and often tragic stories of the Serb women who decided to share their personal memories of the war experience is beyond the scope of this thesis. Elements of the personal stories of the interlocutors will be presented here only insofar as they shed light on their understanding and interpretation of the war. It is important to mention, that not all the interviewed women shared the same opinions about the war in Bosnia. Some of them were very radical in their assessment and presented an extremely nationalistic and one-sided picture of the war, in which there was no place for Bosnian Muslim victims or Serb responsibility for the war. Other women, although similarly arguing that Serbs were the victims of the war and denying scale and nature of crimes committed by the Bosnian Serbs, did not neglect the suffering of the Muslim side and were less radical in putting the blame on the Muslim side. Without yet acknowledging major Serb responsibility for the crimes committed in the war, they presented an approach which could be summarised as 'both sides are equally responsible'. Finally, three interviewees were very critical of

the Serb national narrative of the war and openly rejected it. Although those women should not be excluded from the results of the research (on the contrary, they proved that 'Serb Women' should not be approached as a homogenous, solid group of like-minded individuals but a rather a collection of people who, in case of this research shared similar experience and belong to the same ethnic group), it must be stated that their opinions of the past were in many parts very different from the predominant narrative presented by the majority of women. Although the interviews with those three women illustrated that the national narrative is not shared by all, it did not change the fact that the radical interpretations of the war were shared by the majority of the women. The accounts and attitudes of the women who were critical of the dominant accounts of the past will be brought again in the conclusion of this thesis, where they will serve as a point in the debate about the memory construction and ways of influencing the process.

In the following chapter, building on Kirmayer's concept of 'landscape of memory' and Ashaplant's et al. notion of 'commemorating arena', I will outline the most important commemorative activities in Srebrenica. While describing places and activities in the field of collective memory, I will analyse the involvement of different actors and their aims as well as dynamics of interaction between them. This will show how much space in the public discourse is available to Serb women and how they engage in the negotiation of the collective memory.

# Landscape of memory in Srebrenica

## **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to outline Srebrenica's "landscape of memory" (Kiermayer 1996) and to show how it is interpreted by the Serb women. I will present the most important sites of remembrance and commemorative activities as well as identify different actors with their memory agendas. By providing a *map of public remembering* I explain the context, in which memories in Srebrenica are negotiated, contextualised and shaped. I use the term politics of memory as to indicate the intentionality of the discussed acts and initiatives, however I want to emphasize that my focus is not so much on deconstructing those conflicting agendas as on how those activities are internalised and reflected upon by the Serb women. Although I identify why certain agents want to see Srebrenica remembered in a particular way, I am more interested in how women see those attempts, to what extent they participate in them and what role those acts of public remembering play in the construction of their personal narratives.

This chapter will primarily build on my ethnographic research conducted in Srebrenica in April 2009, numerous visits to the town in 2007 and 2008, as well as Ger Duijzings's (2007) analysis of the 'afterlife' of the Srebrenica massacre.

## **“Being in history”**

Duijzings offers the, so far, most critical and insightful look at the involvement of the international community in the process of shaping public commemorations of genocide in Srebrenica. He also inscribes present-day memory dynamics in Srebrenica into a broader perspective of regional memory politics starting from World War II.

In his work, Duijzings offers valuable thoughts about how and why 'the commemorative arena' in Srebrenica is organised in this particular way. By presenting Muslim commemorations of 11 July and Serb ceremonies of 12 July on the backdrop of politics of memory managed by Tito's

communist elites, as well as their nationalist successors, the author presents how both populations came to the point where they are face the 'commemorative arena' of the present.

In his view, current situation in Srebrenica can be understood only in light of the decades long restrictions of public mourning of World War II victims under the communist regime and the consequent outburst of public recollection of the narratives of Serb victimhood after Tito's death and especially just before the outbreak of the wars of the '1990. Such a claim is by now a common place. According to some authors, one of the main causes of the violence in the Balkans of the '1990, was the fact that the country's communist elite, and as a result the Yugoslav society, had never 'worked through' the bitter experiences and memories of the World War II (Hayden, 2004; Miller, 2007; Wagner 2008). Until late '1980s it was not possible to present the war events in any other framework than the one of a fight between fascist and partisans. In this framework, neither victims nor perpetrators were entitled to ethnic belonging, they were to be identified in public, commemorated or forgotten according to their claimed ideological stand. Consequently, the predominantly Serb victims of Jasenovac and other Ustasha concentration camps were not mourned in public in order not to undermine the idea of 'Brotherhood and Unity' promoted by Tito. The results of my research in Srebrenica entirely confirmed this argument as Jasenovac and the Serb losses in the Second World War were continuously brought up in the interviews.

Two contributions of Duijzings's article are extremely important for the debate about the politics of memory in Srebrenica: his critical assessment of the involvement of the representatives of international community, and observation about the changing nature of the Bosniak 'being' in history-idea of different ways in which societies engage with the past (a concept which he takes from Maurice Bloch, 1998). Duijzings argues that while for Serbs, victimhood has always been an essential point in their national narrative and a way of 'being in history', Bosnian Muslims, who previously centered their identity discourse around religion, in the past few years resemble Serbs more (147). The commemorations in Srebrenica are the most vivid illustration of this process.

What Duijizing's fails to do in otherwise an extremely critical article, is to examine how the

activities on the 'commemorative arena' influence the way memories of the local population are shaped. This chapter offers a few suggestions about this process, focusing especially on the Serb population. I agree with Olick (2007), that 'shared symbols and deep structures are only real insofar as individuals-albeit sometimes organised as members of groups-treat them as such or instantiate them in practice' (p.10). Therefore I want to see how Serb women view the commemorative arena, how they reflect upon it and how their memories are mediated through it.

### **Commemorative arena or battle of memories**

The word Srebrenica used to stand for nothing more than a name of a small town in Eastern Bosnia. Today it is mentioned among such places as Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Srebrenica went through a process of what Slawomir Kapralski (2006, p. 187), in reference to Jedwabne, called 'localisation of evil' that is describing a situation in which a concrete name begins to stand for a whole complex of events- a name that we refer to when we are unable to fully understand or even name the events themselves. 'Had there be no Srebrenica, the battles over memory in Bosnia-Herzegovina would likely be quite different', observes Paul Miller (2007, p. 318)

As war in Srebrenica became 'internationalised' so did the memory of it. Commemorations of the war became a battlefield where political, national and religious forces confront over how events of 1992-1995 should or should not be remembered. Public remembering in Srebrenica is hardly ever done without an agenda, never done without making the claim for truth and justice. Together with truth and justice, universally claimed by all sides, commemorative acts and frameworks of remembering offered to the population carry with them more concrete, tangible political demands.

The brutality and the scale of the massacre in Srebrenica, the prevailing sense of denial among the local Serbs, and the bitterness existing in both communities (or, as I would like to see them: national groups constituting the local community), is further complicated by a high involvement of external actors. While presenting the 'landscape of memory' of Srebrenica, I will

analyse the commemorative activities in two groups: those overtly representing memory of one national group (Muslim commemorations of 11 July, followed by Serb ceremonies of 12 July) and three fairly new initiatives claiming to embrace narratives and memories of both sides (opening of the Research and Documentation Centre in Srebrenica, Week of Memory, consultations for establishment of the Regional Truth Commission).

### ***Potocari Memorial Centre***

The most important Muslim is the Memorial Centre located a few kilometers from the town of Srebrenica. It was established as a result of persistent efforts of Muslim women organisations supported both politically and financially by the Office of the High Representative (OHR)<sup>i</sup>. The Centre was officially inaugurated by President Bill Clinton in 2003 and since then became the central site of annual commemorations of the Srebrenica massacre. With the opening of the Memorial Centre, not only the dead but also the living began to come back as the very slow process of return of the Muslim population to their houses in Srebrenica begun around that time (Duijzings, 2006, p.160). The OHR linked the question of burial of the genocide victims directly to the issue of reconciliation and as such the establishment of the Memorial Centre provided a symbolic expression of re-establishment of the Muslim presence in RS.

The first years of commemorations at Potocari met with strong opposition from both the RS government and local Serb population. Numerous provocations and acts of violence were reported, among them in 2005, just a few days before the tenth anniversary of the massacre, explosive material was discovered close to the venue. With years however, fewer incidents occur. Since the 2005 decree of the OHR, the Memorial Centre does not fall into the jurisdiction of the government of the Republika Srpska, to which it geographically belongs.

The location of the Center has a very symbolical and emotional meaning to many victims as it is established in the buildings of a battery plant, turned during the war into the headquarters of the UNPROFOR. At this place in July 11 1995, many women saw for the last time male members

of their families, who, not allowed into the base, embarked on a deadly journey through the forests with the aim of reaching the Muslim controlled territory.

The Memorial Centre consists of two parts: a Memorial Room located in the buildings of the factory, where an exhibition about the events of July 1995 is displayed and a cemetery located across the road, where remains of victims of genocide are buried. The central part of the cemetery belongs to an open-air mosque, and it is surrounded by a circle of stone panels with names of victims of genocide inscribed in an alphabetical order. The inscription on a stone located just next to it reads '8372...total number of victims, which is not final.'

The most important annual commemorative ceremony held in Potocari is the *janazah*/funeral of the victims of genocide. Every year, on 11 July, the Memorial Centre is visited by tens of thousands of people who come to honour the memory of the victims and to participate in the burial of hundreds of bodies of Muslim boys and men. Every year new bodies are excavated from the primary and secondary mass graves and identified in a lengthy process of DNA matching culminated in the ceremony on 11 July. By 2008, out of 8372 names mentioned on the panel in the cemetery, 3215 bodies were buried in the cemetery.

Prior to the commemoration itself, a three-day, 100km-long March of Peace to Srebrenica takes place, commemorating the journey of Muslim men who tried to reach territory controlled by the Bosnian Army in July 1995. The March of Peace has been staged several years, gaining in international character with each passing year. The event receives extensive media coverage as the televised images of grieving families weeping by freshly-dug graves have come to symbolise the continuing trauma experienced by the thousands of Bosnian Muslim families.

I participated both in the Peace March and funeral ceremony in 2008 and was overwhelmed by the scope of the ceremony. Dozens of buses brought numerous groups from all over Bosnia followed by Muslim families from abroad. While for many Bosniak families, 11 July became an occasion for private reunions of members scattered around the world, the Memorial Centre is also a destination of organised groups and representations of towns, municipalities, victims' and veteran

associations. For the Muslim population, commemorations became a public ritual enforcing national identity. As such, the Memorial Centre represents what Pierre Nora (1989) would call both *milieu de mémoire* and *lieu de mémoire* of the Bosniak nation. Estimates say that over 20 000 people gathered in Potocari on 11 July 2008. Almost all women, out of respect for the religious character of the ceremony, covered their heads with scarves. Once in a while a t-shirt with the motto “Never Forget Srebrenica” could be spotted in the crowd.

It is true that commemorations in Potocari have a great emotional and personal meaning for the Muslim victims' families, especially those who were lucky enough to have bodies of their beloved ones found, identified and buried. At the same time, the group funeral of 11 July has been used as an opportunity for sending political messages and voicing not only grief and sense of loss, but also concrete demands and accusations. Organisations of Mothers and Women of Srebrenica, who were the driving force behind the establishment of the Memorial Centre, used the attention received on 11 of July in order to remind the world about the wide-spread impunity of war criminals in Bosnia and difficulties of life in the Serb dominated entity.

As every year, the ceremony was attended by numerous Bosnian and foreign officials, highest rank diplomats, representatives of international organisations and foreign delegations. Srebrenica occupies the centre of the official commemoration of war in Bosnia and as such was given a very special status. In 2008 the Council of Ministers of BiH pronounced July 11th a day of mourning for the entire country, including both of its entities and the Brcko District. However, Republika Srpska rejected the decree and refused to lower its flags. Against the background of deeply divided memories, Srebrenica is much more than just a local problem. In January 2009, The European Parliament declared 11<sup>th</sup> July an annual day of commemoration of genocide in Srebrenica.

This considerable involvement of the representatives of the international community has been eloquently evaluated by Duijzings (2007, p. 160) as 'a platform of ritual declarations of guilt



and responsibility by members of international community, who use it to express their regret for having allowed the massacre to happen.'

This trend of giving Srebrenica a meaning far beyond the local context is apparent in the opening speech delivered by Bill Clinton in 2003:

Bad people who lusted for power killed these good people simply because of who they were. (...) We remember this terrible crime because we dare not forget, because we must pay tribute to the innocent lives, many of them children, snuffed out in what must be called genocidal madness. I hope the very mention of the name "Srebrenica" will remind every child in the world that pride in our own religious and ethnic heritage does not require or permit us to dehumanize or kill those who are different.

Commemorations in Potocari are meant not only to provide the families of victims with a sense of closure and comfort but also to serve as a symbol of violence based on nothing more than religious and ethnic belonging. In this vision of the massacre, there is no space for dynamics of war, revenge or tactics so often recalled by the Serb side in their attempt to explain the events of July 1995. The message sent by Clinton, and consequently by other representatives of the international community is clear: Muslims were killed because of who they were, not what they did. As Duijznigs rightly explains, the OHR, by sponsoring the Memorial Centre, positioned itself very close to the Muslim interpretation of war, in which the massacre in Srebrenica becomes 'de-contextualised' and made to a generic symbol of Muslim suffering and irrational Serbian acts (p.163).

### ***Serb commemorations***

The picture of Srebrenica and Potocari filled with tens of thousands of visitors and top-rank diplomats of 11 July stands in sharp contrast with almost empty streets on the following day, when the local Serb population holds their commemorative ceremonies. 12 July is marked in the Orthodox Serb calendar as Petrovdan (St Peter's Day), a religious holiday aimed at commemorating Christian victims of religious persecutions. In Srebrenica, however, this date symbolises more than the religious holiday, as on this day, in 1992, Muslim forces killed several dozen Serbs in Zalazje

and other villages nearby (NIOD, 2002). With time, commemorations on 12 July came to honor victims of other locations as well and developed into the main commemorative date for local Serbs. In total, the Serb side claims, that between 3000 and 3500 Serbs were killed in Srebrenica municipality, mainly as a result of the attacks of Muslim forces on the villages (Bulatovic 2005). Findings of the Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) from Sarajevo provide documentation for death of 480 Serbs, majority of them soldiers (RDC, 2007).

While the Muslim acts of public remembrance in Potocari are strongly supported and attended by representatives of the international community and media, Serb commemorations are mainly organised by the local community, and, so far, have not been visited by any of the diplomats present in Potocari. Similarly, representatives of Belgrade-based women's pacifist organisation "Women in Black", who participated in the March of Peace and marked their presence at the Memorial Centre by displaying a big banner "Solidarity" did not attend any of the commemorations of the Serb victims. Politicians of RS, on the other hand, having in general being absent at the funeral in Potocari regularly show up at the ceremonies of 12 July.

In the first years after the war, the Serb population of Srebrenica commemorated 11 July as the day of liberation of the town. This was followed by the 12<sup>th</sup> of July- day of mourning of victims. Now, only the latter celebration remains. This shift, according to Duijzings (2007), came both as a result of the fact that with time it becomes more difficult and embarrassing to openly celebrate the 'liberation' of Srebrenica, but it was also aimed to counter the Muslim emphasis on victimhood displayed in Potocari (p. 162). In some villages plaques were erected in order to honor victims of Muslim attacks. The most important example can be found in Bratunac, Zalazje, Kravice and Skelani. Since ceremonies on 12 July are held simultaneously in different venues, there is no spectacular gathering as the one in Potocari. Commemorations, organized by the Republic of Srpska Government Committee for Upholding Traditions of the Wars of Liberation, encompass religious service at the churches, cultural events at the libraries and visiting graves of the killed Serbs in Bratunac and lying of wreaths at the Monument to Murdered Civilians and Fallen Warriors

of the RS Army. Men wearing t-shirts with pictures of Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic were reported.

Duijzing speaks of those events and “counter-commemorations” and “counter-monuments” (p. 162). While one of the aims of the Muslim commemorations in the Memorial Centre is to de-contextualise the Srebrenica Massacre, and to present it as a generic symbol of illogical evil, Serb commemorations aim precisely at the opposite effect. By commemorating casualties of the war, Serbs not only emphasize their victimhood and send the message that there were victims on both sides; they also try to challenge the vision of war presented by their Bosniak counterparts. In the Serb version, 11 July was not an illogical outburst of mass scale violence but a consequence of the Muslim attacks on Serb villages. The story of 1995 cannot be told without these elements. Serb commemorations also call attention to the fact, that the Muslim population of Srebrenica was not as defenseless as it is presented in the vision of the past advocated in Potocari. Some of the men, who died in 1995 without weapons, were soldiers before.

Both commemorations raise many controversies and are driven by many different agendas, which due to the scope of this paper cannot be discussed in detail here. It is enough to say, that together with the moral order claimed by both sides, there are some clear political implications linked to acceptance of the vision of the past presented by both sides, especially that of Potocari.

The Memorial Centre is used to force Serbs to accept the facts about the massacre. Serb acknowledgement of genocide may potentially undermine the legitimacy of the RS, as it is described by the Muslim side as 'a genocidal entity'. Over time, demands for the RS to be cancelled and for Bosnia to return to its pre-Dayton unitary shape have been replaced by some with demands for a special status for Srebrenica. Mainly women's victim organisations argue that since Srebrenica was a site of genocide, it should not fall under the jurisdiction of the entity that was established as a consequence of ethnic cleansing. In this sense, commemorations in Potocari constitute not only a forum for expressing grief and sense of loss, but also a place of political engagement.

## ***The Serb women reflect on the commemorative arena***

It is this political dimension of the commemorations of 11 July that is reflected strongly in the interviews with the Serb women. The most widespread view is that they are highly politicised and manipulated. A majority of the women I spoke to commented on the scale and character of the ceremony in Potocari, one calling it a 'circus', another 'festival of death'. They accuse the Muslim side of 'using their victims for political purposes', pointing out that "this is all politics. The worst thing is to use victims for politics. That is dangerous." Bosniak women are accused of 'being paid to talk', and being 'professional victims'. In contrast, Serb people are presented as incapable of "making a spectacle of their suffering". For a woman, whose husband and mother in law were killed in Srebrenica, commemorations in Potocari is an attempt to manipulate history and 'present Muslims as victims'. Even those women, who did not contest the gravity of the massacre in July 1995, agreed that the character of its commemorations was questionable.

Beyond any doubt, the Memorial Centre occupies an important place in all the interviews and caused very emotional reactions. Interestingly, in several cases, it was the Memorial Centre that provided a starting point for narratives about war events rather than a concluding comment.

The Memorial Centre remains a contested place as it is claimed that it presents a manipulated vision of the history. There is a lot of controversy about the number of victims claimed at the Memorial Center, as those who were killed in July 1995. It is sort of a 'common knowledge' among the Serbs in Srebrenica that the list of victims in Potocari includes those who died before 11 July and as such should not be considered victims of genocide. One woman claimed that bodies buried in Potocari belong even to the Muslims who 'fought against Serbs in the war in Croatia'. Women spoke widely of 'manipulation with numbers' and Muslims 'burying everyone at the Memorial Centre'<sup>ii</sup>. Almost none of the women agreed that there could have been as many as eight thousand people killed in July 1995. One woman bluntly stated that it was simply impossible to 'kill them all'. Similarly, women spoke of Serb bodies being buried in Muslim graves and some

of them demanded that the graves were opened and bones subjected to another process of DNA analysis.

A majority of the women I spoke to have never visited the Memorial Centre, those who have did it while accompanying foreign visitors as part of their work. A twenty-seven-year old woman said that she went there as everyone who wanted to go was offered a day off at work. Another woman went because of curiosity. Few Serbs reported that they would like to visit the Memorial Centre, but first, they are not sure how they would be accepted by the Muslim families of victims and secondly, they were expecting problems from the Serb population. As a young hairdresser married to a man from a mixed marriage said, she would visit the cemetery if there were more Serbs doing it. She does not dare to be the first. The only woman who used to attend the commemoration of 11 July in order to pay respect to the victims admitted that the first time was a very emotional experience, whereas later it turned into political manifestation.

As commemorations of 11 July are perceived as a strongly politicised and manipulated event, in the eyes of Serb women, ceremonies held on 12 July are focused on victims, with no politics involved. One of the women was aware of the fact that 12 July celebrations are perceived as a form of provocation and direct nationalistic challenge to the Muslim ceremony held the day before. For her, such an approach was yet another proof of the biased and unfair attitude towards the Serb population “Petrovdan is an old Orthodox tradition and as such has been celebrated long before 11 July.” While she emphasized the religious character of the ceremonies, she admitted that to her this aspect was of little importance.

For a woman who until today has not found the body of her two brothers killed during the war, lighting a candle at the monument to Serb victims in Bratunac is especially important as she felt that it gave her some sort of comfort. A majority of the women however did not attach great significance to the ceremonies of Petrovdan, many of them did not attend it. Representative of a nongovernmental organisation dedicated to documentation of Serb civilian victims reported that

they were planning to erect a monument to the Serbs killed in Srebrenica, but that they were expecting problems from the municipality. “They do not allow commemorating memory of Serb victims. I am sure that we will not manage to do it”.

In the opinion of the librarian from Srebrenica, the commemorations divide the local community which otherwise lives in peace. She said that every day people interact, work together, talk about their experiences but when July arrives, the atmosphere changes, and becomes denser. People become quieter, stay home more, interact less. “Every day there will be 11 of July and 12 of July. Every day we start from the beginning. Every side has its programme, all that euphoria, commemorating this and that. Then we start slowly separating one from another, not that we avoid each other but we stay quiet.”

In general, women perceive the commemorative arena as dominated by the Muslim side. They feel that the memory of the Serb victims is neglected and the vision of the past presented by the ceremony at the Memorial Center distorted. Younger women seemed tired of the entire commemorative activity- on both sides. As one of them admitted, she feels as if she lived in a museum. Another complained that she feels like she was constantly walking on graves. ‘there is no space for life in Srebrenica. It is all about death’.

### ***‘Transparent initiatives’***

The ceremonies of 11 and 12 July illustrate ethnic dichotomy and separation of the commemorative practices in Srebrenica. They do not offer space for encounter or confrontation between two communities and their narratives of the past. Each ceremony serves the purpose of their community and expresses an agenda of its leadership. The arena of public remembering is highly segmental and does not provide space for interaction between two nations.

During the past two years however, there have been at least three initiatives aiming at providing space, where stories of both sides would be included and presented. The Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) from Sarajevo opened a local office in Srebrenica in order to extend

its outreach towards the local community and to present the results of the three year long documentation project of the human war losses on the territory of entire Bosnia. The RDC constructed a unique digital data base, a 'virtual memorial', where all victims of war, regardless of their ethnicity are included. This is the only research of such a scale that did not focus on documenting victims of one side of the conflict but all of them. The RDC considers itself as a nongovernmental, non-partial and non - partisan institution aimed at investigating and gathering facts, documents and data on genocide, war crimes and human rights violations, 'regardless of the ethnic, political, religious, social, or racial affiliation of the victims.' (RDC, 2007)

The RDC has an extremely difficult task in Srebrenica. Since the organisation is based in Sarajevo it is automatically associated with the Muslim side. Also, the fact that the results of the 'Human Losses 1992-1995' project, while including data about Serb victims, do support the genocidal interpretation of the war events in Bosnia and are presented as such by its director, it does not raise levels of trust among Serb population. While some representatives of the Serb victim organisations expressed interest in cooperation with the RDC, others bluntly reject it, saying that the RDC "is not there to document the truth but to legitimise their version of history with a fake attempt of including information about the Serb population." Put differently, in the eyes of my interlocutors, the RDC is perceived not as an impartial research organisation, but as an advocate of the Muslim vision of the history. This is supported by the fact that no Serb is employed by the organisation and that the local office is run by a Muslim man who lived in Srebrenica during the war and was one of those who made it to the Bosniak- controlled territories in July 1995.

The attempt of the RDC illustrates the complexity of engagement with memory activities in Srebrenica. The mandate of the organisation is to 'investigate and gather facts' (ibid.). At the same time, the mandate talks about documenting genocide and the director of the RDC overtly expresses his interpretation of the war's events. Similarly, statistics and analysis presented by the RDC present the scale and nature of the atrocities committed in Bosnia pointing towards responsibility of the Serb forces in the mass scale killings of Muslim population (RDC, 2007a). The results of the

RDC's research have been internationally accepted as the most reliable data about the number of war casualties and quoted by the US government, the UND and OSCE. Still, my interlocutors in Srebrenica did not perceive the RDC as an unbiased and neutral organisation.

Here a question of compromise arises. Can the RDC be expected to give up its strong stand (backed by the decision of the ICTY and the ICJ) on the crime of genocide committed in Srebrenica? Can it modify the fact, that the numbers included in its database illustrate a great disproportion in the scale and character of crimes committed by the sides of the conflict? Should it employ its staff based not on their skills and integrity, but also ethnic affiliation in order to gain the trust of the Serb population? What are the conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to be perceived as a neutral investigator of history rather than an agent of one of the sides? The Serb population complains that nobody pays attention to their victims. At the same time, when an initiative to establish an inclusive account of the past, where victims of both sides would be included, appears it meets opposition.

Another attempt of breaking through the wall that separates the conflicting narratives comes from the Coalition for the Establishment of the Regional Truth Commission (RECOM). The idea of RECOM came from three nongovernmental organisations from Sarajevo, Belgrade and Zagreb and aims at promoting a regional approach to establishing facts about the violent wars of the '1990s.

At this moment, the initiative is at the stage of conducting consultations with the civil society sector across the Former Yugoslavia. During my field work in Srebrenica, I had a chance to participate in consultations with the local victim organisations and to observe the dynamics of the confrontation. That meeting provided an interesting case study of how the meeting of two conflicting visions of history takes place and how it is perceived by the local community.

First of all, only three local Serbs were present at the meetings as opposed to several dozen Muslims. Organisers claimed that they had invited representatives of several Serb victim organisations, however they did not show up. When few days later I spoke to a president of one of the Serb victim organisations, he confirmed that he chose not to attend the meeting as, in his eyes, it



was ‘yet another initiative at manipulating the history while camouflaging itself as an impartial process’.

Facilitators of the meeting explained the idea for establishing a regional truth commission with the need to provide space for the victims to present their stories 'without a national prefix'. Representatives of the Muslim women organisation opposed the creation of the commission, arguing that there have been enough commissions in the past and that the facts are known. They spoke of *Serb* perpetrators, *Serb* criminals and *Bosniak* victims. When the only representative of the Serb victim organisation talked about the Serb victims, and especially the fact that she lost her husband she was strongly attacked by a journalist from Sarajevo. “How do you dare to talk about losing a husband when in this room there are women who lost their children?” the journalist asked rhetorically. Similarly, a young Serb man, who spoke about his father and grandmother being killed in their apartment in Srebrenica in 1993, heard from one of the Muslim women that his father was a spy and he was rightly killed. That all the Serbs in Srebrenica should have been killed.

The day after the meeting, information about the verbal attacks spread in the Serb community. To the women I interviewed it proved, that there was no space in Srebrenica for memory of Serbian victims and that the memory arena was monopolised by the Muslim organisations. Women concluded that there was no point in participating in such events, as they were only attacked and humiliated there hearing the denial about Serb victims. Another presumably impartial and objective initiative aimed at establishing an inclusive version of the past was rejected by the local Serbs and labeled as biased and discriminatory. At the same time, the general idea of establishing a truth commission was welcomed as long as it would include representatives of both sides and a sincere attempt at establishing the truth.

Foxen (2000), in the context of Truth Commissions and Reports in Guatemala argues that, while collective memory projects serve important political, social and psychological purposes, they cannot encompass the 'social memory' of a population, or the many heterogeneous truths and memories dwelling in the hearts and minds of the large majority. She underlines that the nuances of

memory are “tremendous and are always reflective of particular contexts and audiences: present motivations, institutional spaces, and psychological states always create a narrative frame- what will be said, remembered, silenced or played down.”(p. 363)

The last element of Srebrenica's landscape of memory that I would like to discuss is the International Week Cooperation Memory, organised since 2007 by the Alexander Lange Foundation. The programme of this event includes seminars, meetings with eyewitnesses, workshops and round tables. Srebrenica is described as a place of memory for all its inhabitants and the whole of Europe and the organisers, want through their presence, “to support those who work for preserving memory and building a new future (...) in order to prove that life is stronger than war and genocide, but only if it is fed with truth and justice about the past.” As I was told by the staff of the Alexander Lange Foundation, the aim of the Memory Week is to provide a platform for presentation of the memories of the war in Srebrenica and to encourage 'community remembering’.

One of my interviewees participated in both editions of the Week of Memory and recalled that they did not include memories of the Serb population. “They were all presenting the story of Muslim suffering while there was no one to talk about Serb victims”. She argues that the programme included a visit to the Memorial Centre in Potocari but not to any of the Serb monuments commemorating attacks on Serb villages.

Maja Akka, from the Alexander Lange Foundation, defends the impartiality of the event, by saying that it is organised around ‘Memory written with a capital “m”, not a memory of Bosniaks or Serbs but people of Srebrenica’. She also points out that the scope of the participation of the Serb population depends on the level of interest they express.

From these examples, it appears that there is no ethnically transparent public remembering in Srebrenica and most of the inclusive initiatives are seized by the Muslim women who are organised, outspoken and experienced in giving public testimonies. They enjoy a position of

acknowledged victimhood and wide international support. The Serb women feel that there is no public space for them to talk about their victims. They are not given agency and are subjects of attacks. In these circumstances, the narratives of war they construct are shaped by the sense of being denied victimhood.

### ***The role of the 'outsiders'***

From these examples, it is clear that the landscape of memory in Srebrenica is actually a battlefield of conflicting narratives and clashing political interests. Commemorative activities advanced by both ethnic groups provide their members with frameworks of explanation of the past that helps them make sense of their personal experiences and memories and to defend moral grounds of the collective identity. Neither of the ceremonies of 11 and 12 July provides space for the victims of the other side or margin for moral questioning of the acts of one's national group. Both Bosniaks and Serbs see themselves as the biggest victims of the war. When it comes to public remembering, Burke advises asking the question 'Who wants whom to remember what?' In the case of the commemorative arena in Srebrenica, a general answer applicable to both sides would point towards nationalistic leaders political seeking legitimacy through exploitation of the traumatic memories of the population.

This picture is, however, complicated by the involvement of the external actors, who play an active role in shaping the memory of the war. Here again different agendas and motivations are at stake fortified by a feeling of guilt for allowing the war to happen in the first place. Duijzings strongly criticises the involvement of 'outsiders', who stand by a narrative of on the sides of the conflict while neglecting collective memory of the other side. In the context of the memory work in Jedwabne, town facing a difficult past of mass murder of its Jewish population, such participation raised different opinions. Ew Wolentarska-Ochman (2006) claims, that the genuine remembering of the tragic events in Jedwabne has been interrupted by the external actors and national projects of *Cleansing the Memory*. As Wolentarska-Ochman reports, there were feelings of anger,

embarrassment, nervousness and abandonment. In such a situation, it was no a surprise to observe that within the national debate, a majority of them tended to internalise arguments of those who offered defense from the accusations. Wolentarska-Ochman argues that the judgmental approach adopted by the press in the case of Jedwabne and the wide attention the town was suddenly granted had negative effects on local memory work. As over time, inhabitants of the town, who rejected the interpretation of the war events in which it was their Polish ancestors rather than Nazi occupants that killed the Jewish population, were labeled as a 'camp of deniers', the alleged "deniers" turned to radicals and the far right press that offered findings defending their good name. Wolentarska-Ochman argues that the political exploitation of the Jedwabne massacre contaminated the process of remembering.

This claim is challenged by Slawomir Kapralski (2006), who rejects the notion of opposition between genuine remembrance of "insiders" and manipulation of memory by the 'external world'. He argues that the people of Jedwabne "remember, talk, and recollect" only when asked by an outsider such as a journalist or filmmaker and consequently, that it was precisely the very presence and involvement of the journalists, politicians and historians that not only, did not contaminate or paralyse the local memory project in Jedwabne, but it actually made it happen. 'Vernacular discourse may defend itself against the unpleasant truth because it may threaten a positive image of the group, and this seems to be precisely the case of the Jedwabne debate and its consequences.' (p.182)

It is a very special set of memories that we are talking about in both Srebrenica and Jedwabne, not melancholic recalling of the past, not morally neutral accounts, not a set of events that would have no consequences for ethical judgments. It is a memory of mass murder that is being discussed; therefore the process of remembering has its own laws. Kapralski quotes Richard Sennet (1998), who claims that 'remembering well requires reopening wounds in a particular way, which one cannot do by themselves remembering well requires a social structure in which people can address others across the boundaries of difference' (p.182). Kapralski warns against the

temptation of exit from history into the realm of myth and through construction of various defensive visions of history. “In the “social therapy” of group memories, he argues, there is a need for “filling up the memory gaps” so that awakening from history as from a nightmare can take place. In this process, there is a place for collective efforts of both insiders and outsiders of the group because, as he closes his article, “groups who live in the shadow of a crime are not the best therapists of their memories”.

I agree with Kapralski, that the local population of Srebrenica- living in the shadow of the crime, is not best equipped to face its own violent past. If not assisted by the 'outsiders' who either line up with one on the sides or intend to facilitate a more just and, at least in theory, ethnically impartial public remembrance, memory of the massacre of July 1995 would probably occupy much less space in the public discourse. Given the fact, that it is not in the interest of the government of the RS and the majority of the Serb population for those to be remembered, it would possibly persist only as a narrative passed in the families of the victims. Involvement of the international community made local Serbs confront the past and influenced their collective memory of the war. This, however, did not result in internalising of the Muslim narrative. The following chapter presents different strategies of incorporating the uncomfortable elements of the past into the personal narratives of the Serb women. It shows, how they cope with the fact of being confronted with the 'outsiders' imposing a vision of the war, which, as Kapralski says, is meant to wake them up from the nightmare of history.

## Collective memory of Serb women

This chapter examines sample of seventeen interviews conducted with Serb women in Srebrenica in April 2009. Although I am aware that this is a fairly limited number of narratives and therefore conclusions reached should not be considered a representative position of all the Serb women in Srebrenica, I argue that certain patterns, motifs and strategies of narrating and explaining war and its legacy repeat in majority of the interviews, and, as such, can be considered as shared by most of the Serb population. Hence, this chapter analyses the *collective memory* of Serb women understood as ‘neither a thing nor merely a tool but mediation itself’ (Olick 2007, p.10).

Memories of women are looked at with the aim of establishing the relationship between the accounts of **personal** experiences and the knowledge of the **national** history. How do personal experiences influence the way women perceive the war and how the public discourse and national frameworks influence the women's personal memories? Can we make clear cut distinction between the two? How ready templates help women make sense and understand their experiences and how their experiences validate the national narrative? What patterns and common elements appear in all the stories? Which memories are 'shared'?

The second objective is to examine the relationship between the **past and the present** which can be observed in the women's stories. How does the present situation influence the way the past is being narrated? What elements of the current life are referred to in the stories of the war events? How the past and the present are interwoven. At which moments are those references made? How the current politics of memory and commemorating practices in Srebrenica influence are reflected in the interviews?

Thirdly, I look at the construction of the accounts of the women in order to identify **strategies of narrating and constructing stories**. To which extend women tell stories of their personal experiences and when do they embark on explaining the wider historical and political context?

How do they construct group categories and in what moments they are mobilised? What are the differences between the way story of Srebrenica is told by the women who lived there before the war and those who moved in afterwards or between women who experienced war as adults and those who were young children at that time? I compare narratives of mothers with those of their daughters to see how memories and interpretations are transmitted through the generations.

Lastly, I will try to extract from the stories presented by the women a vision of a **spatial memory** of the war. Is the war 'remembered' or encoded in the geography of Srebrenica and Bosnia?

### ***Methodology of research***

Initially I planned to interview a group of women consisting of three categories: those who lived in Srebrenica before the war, throughout the war and after it; women who lived in Srebrenica before the war, who emigrated during the war and came back after 1995 and women who moved to Srebrenica after the war. This plan, however, had to be modified during the field work since there was not even one woman who belonged to the first group living in Srebrenica at the time when the field work was conducted. The few dozen Bosnian Serbs who decided to stay in Srebrenica during the war were either killed or moved out afterwards. As a result, all the seventeen interviews were made with women representing the remaining two groups.

The women were contacted by a snow ball method, through Serbian victims' organisations, individual contacts, especially with younger women. In three cases I was able to interview both mothers and daughters. Several women were engaged in the work of various organisations (victim organisations, youth organisations, UNDP), others were homemakers. The age group included women in their fifties and sixties who were adults when the war started as well as younger women who lived through the war as young children.

Except for one woman, all the women who were approached were eager to talk. One woman initially agreed to an interview but after two days cancelled it explaining that she had

prejudices against foreigners investigating events of Srebrenica and was afraid of manipulation of her words.

The interviews with women consisted of roughly two parts. The first question asked was ‘When did the war begin for you?’ and was meant to provoke the interlocutors to talk about their personal experience. During this part no questions were asked (other than clarifying certain details like places or dates) as the aim was to see which events were mentioned by women and what was omitted, how they constructed their stories, what they included. The second part of the interview consisted of several questions usually relating to the elements of the war that were not mentioned by the women (such as the siege of Srebrenica, genocide, role of Radovan Karadzic). The main historical events referred to in the interviews and commemorating practices belong to the period of 1992-1995, the time of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Although the women were making comments about various moments both in the history and the present time, the focus of the interviews was the memory of the war events, especially those related to Srebrenica.

### ***Accounts of war***

The narratives of my interlocutors consisted of mixture of recollections from the past, references to the present times, individual memories and information they had from the media. Stories of personal suffering blended with attempts to give political and historical explanations to the war, its causes and legacy. A sense of absence and loss on various levels of experience was reflected in all interviews: absence of family members; absence of voice in the public discourse about the war and recognition of Serb suffering; absence of justice; absence of pre-war peaceful and prosperous life in Srebrenica. All that was lost, mourned and followed by feelings of anger and frustration.

### ***And they say they did not kill anyone***

One of the most striking elements of the interviews was the fact that the stories narrated were



constructed in direct opposition to what women considered 'their story'. 'They' or 'the other side' stood for the Bosniaks, who were constantly quoted as denying Serb victimhood and manipulating history. In this sense, many of the stories narrated by the women, where told from the position of refuting, what was perceived as Muslim lies. Women were either beginning with stories of Serb suffering and ending them with comments about how those events are misrepresented and absent from the public discourse or, on the contrary started from accusing Muslims of telling lies and hiding the truth, which was then illustrated by examples of attacks on Serb population. In either way, 'they' were always present, not merely as actors appearing in the stories, but as an invisible participant of the interview, whose opinions had to be challenged and discredited. This was accompanied by feelings of bitterness and sense of injustice. Gordana, whose husband and disable mother in law stayed in Srebrenica and were killed in their apartment said that she feels humiliated when she watches on TV and listens on the radio that there were no Serb victims. "We, the families of the civilian victims are most offended, humiliated and brought to the zero level."

The sense of denial of Serb victimhood was a motif visible in all interviews. It was illustrated both on the level of personal experience 'Am I not a victim? Did I not suffer?' And in the broader, national perspective as 'Nobody cares about Serb victims'. One of the women accused Serbian leaders of being ashamed of civilian victims and not investing efforts in documentation crimes and speaking out loud "as they (Muslims) do'. There was a shared sense of the Serb account of history being absent from the public discourse in Srebrenica, and Bosnia in general. Women complained about 'their mouth is shut', as 'you cannot speak of Serb victims'. Two women illustrated this general notion with the example of two incidents during the RECOM consultations described in the previous chapter. The fact that a representative of a Serb victim organisation was verbally attacked by a Muslim journalist proved that, for the time being, there was no space for the truth about the war to be told.

## Muslim lies, Serb truths

The same RECOM meeting served as an example of how Muslim women tell lies about the war and accuse innocent Serbs. Hence, the accounts and explanations of the war events presented by the Bosniak side are greatly exaggerated and should not be trusted.

It was extremely thought-provoking to observe how the understanding and narration of the past event was modified during one talk.

Gordana's husband, just as the man wrongly accused during the RECOM consultation, stayed in Srebrenica when it got under the Bosniak control, as his disable mother was not able to travel. Both were shot in their apartment in the middle of the town. Gordana was informed that he was accused of espionage for the Serb side. She said that she never knew if that was true and was not able to verify it. When representative of a Serb victims' organisation (who by the way was not present at the meeting but heard of it from someone else) briefed her about the incident at the RECOM consultations, and categorically told her that, in the light of the false accusations from that meeting, her husband for sure was not a spy, Gordana eagerly accepted this explanation. 'They make up stories and accuse innocent Serbs in order to justify their crimes' said Gordana. The woman left the meeting with an interpretation of the tragic war event, which was much easier to accept: her husband was not a potential spy-he was nothing else than a civilian victim of barbarian violence.

Many women saw in the Memorial Centre in Potocari manipulations with the history, exaggerations of the Muslim casualties and lies about the past. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is a common knowledge among the Serbs in Srebrenica (and Serbs everywhere) that the list of victims of genocide displayed in the Memorial Centre contains names of people killed before July 1995 or far from Srebrenica. 'Manipulations with the numbers' is a *leitmotif* of almost all interviews. Since women *know* that there are names included which should not be there, how can one trust numbers of victims claimed by the Muslim side?

All those elements served my interviewees as a ground for disbelieving accounts of the war

presented by the Muslims side and trust version provided by the Serb scholars, officials and media. Women often referred to Serb publications where Serb victims of Srebrenica were listed. Some of them were able to give approximate numbers of Serb casualties (often over 3, 000), majority only knew that 'there were many'. The confirmation of the Serb losses by 'experts' provided women with confidence that their grief and sense of national victimhood were justified.

Similarly, they gained a sense of collective suffering from media reports about Serb victims, not only in Bosnia but in Kosovo and Serbia. Sometimes, media offered explanations about their own experiences, like in case of Milanka, a fifty year old employee of a non-governmental organisation dedicated to documentation of the Serb victims. Women were both recipients of media reports but also, could see themselves as participants of the events covered. Milanka's story is mixed with media reporting relates to the times when she lived in a collective accommodation in Bratunac, a Serb-dominated town nearby Srebrenica. She said that Serbs there were poisoned with uranium. She knew that from the television. "Television was talking about it recently, but the truth will come out one day". As Milanka learnt from the audition, a woman and a man died within one year from the same illness. One young boy was left bald. Milanka concluded that her son in few years will also stay without hair. In the light of the information from the media, this will be a result of uranium poisoning.

Milanka made a clear division between media from the Federation and those from Republika Srpska, saying that she trusts only the latter. Bjelina was considered the most objective TV station.

One can know that they do not tell lies. When I know something for sure and then I see it on TV then I know that it is not a lie. And when you are sure of something and then you hear something totally different and that is what you hear on Federal TV or Hayatt then that is scary. Thanks god we managed to get TV Bjelina here, just recently. They did not allow it! It has signal in America and Australia and we did not have it Srebrenica! They were blocked as they tell the truth. At Bjelina know that the Serbian nation was killed. They do not exaggerate. I think that they are objective but they say from the position that Serbs were killed.

Milanka before and during the war lived in Sarajevo. When the city was under the siege, she was in the part controlled by the Serbian forces. During the interview she recalled vividly the day when she was wounded by an exploding grenade. While telling the story, she was interweaving her

personal memories with what she knew from TV. She was bitter about the fact, that according to her, the media was presenting only Muslims being attacked in Sarajevo.

I only went to fetch water. I do not know how did it go to the world that chetniks killed people? How was it possible that TV was showing people killed in line for bread? Why they did not record me when I was wounded?

This was yet another example of sense of being absent from the public discourse: Serbs were being *talked about*, hardly ever *talked to*. They were presented in the media as genocidal nation, but never as victims. Unless it was Serb media.

### **Us and them- construction of categories**

Beyond any doubt, national or ethnic affiliation was the most salient and widely applied in all the narratives. People were identified as 'us-Serbs' and 'them- Muslims'. At certain moments however this classification was further diversified, both in a positive and negative sense as an indicative merger of nationality and gender manifested itself throughout the narratives.

Interviewees very often referred to the Muslim women in Srebrenica, at times making distinctions between women they knew personally and the most outspoken, publicly visible representatives of women victim's organisation. As the first were described as decent and accusing Serbs of being genocidal nation, the latter group was considered as 'full of hatred' and 'making spectacles'. As it was presented, '**they**' shamesly use their victims in politics', 'are paid and trained to talk', when Serb women 'cannot behave like that', are 'different' and 'more dignified'.

The gender category proved salient in description of the reality. Women identified themselves as parents and spoke of understanding pain of *all mothers* and feeling sorry for the women who lost their sons in July 1995. This category of motherhood, which first appeared as universal and transcending ethnic boundaries, was soon re-inscribed into the national frameworks of perceived denial. None of the women I spoke to had lost a child. When they mentioned pain of the Muslim mothers it was immediately followed by description of one's war experiences. One woman, who spent part of the war in Serb-controlled town of Bratunac, reported feeling unease and sadness when in July 1995 she saw buses filled with women and children transported to the

Muslim-controlled territories. She felt sad, because it reminded her of her own suffering and sense of insecurity when she had to leave Srebrenica with two little children. Women on the one hand, were relating to the pain of Muslim mothers by referring to a sense of common experience and *motherhood*, on the other hand, they were making a point that ‘mothers of Srebrenica’ includes women of both nations and there were women who lost children on both sides. One of my interlocutors rhetorically asked why there are no Serb women in the ‘Mothers of Srebrenica’ or ‘Women of Srebrenica’, two most visible and emblematic Muslim victim organisations. We both knew that this would not be possible and that was not what my interviewee was advocating. She was manifesting frustration over the fact that the gender discourse was sized, dominated and identified only with the Muslim women. In a landscape of memory organised this way, there was no place left for acknowledgment of difficulties endured by the Serb women and validating traumatic character of their experiences. Similarly, one woman, who was wounded during the war, expressed lack of such recognition within the Serb population. She considered ‘civilian victims bigger victims than soldiers as soldiers had guns and could protect themselves.’ The ‘passive’ versus ‘active’ nature of war experiences described in the narratives is also a manifestation of the gendered character of roles. Majority of the women told stories of constant movement (between Serbia and Bosnia), runaway, journey and forced passage. They were staying in houses of strangers, without money, slept with clothes on ready to leave in case of an attack, having very little belongings and having to look after their children. Men were fighting or were killed so they had to take responsibility for families. This active position within families was however not reflected in active role in the conflict. Only one incident showed women as playing an active role in shaping the situation. One of the most shocking stories of the war in Srebrenica is that of Serb women preventing lorries with humanitarian aid from passing Bratunac on their way to Srebrenica. While few of the women who spent the war in Bratunac denied knowing anything about it (which is questionable given the small size of the town), one of my interlocutors admitted stopping trucks filled with food and medicine for Sreberenica. ‘We had to get food for out children’, she said,

adding that while there were dozens of convoys to Srebrenica, people in Bratunac had no food. This was the only moment mentioned, when women presented themselves as actively engaging in the political situation.

### **Good Muslims, bad Muslims**

Although people of Bosnia were predominantly talked about as Serbs, Muslim/Bosniaks and Croats, several differentiations within the groups were made. A few women underlined that ‘not all Muslims are bad’ and that they knew some ‘decent Muslims’. In their stories, women mentioned examples of good deeds of Bosniaks, who either buried bodies of their dead family members and cleaned Serb graves when Srebrenica was under Bosniak control or warned them of upcoming danger. Those examples were however often followed by explanation of how those individuals got in trouble with the rest of the Muslim population for helping Serbs. One woman spoke warmly of a Bosniak female doctor who advised her to leave Tuzla few days before the blockade of the city. My interviewee mentioned twice that she regrets not remembering that doctor's name as she “saved her life”. Within the group of Muslims, differentiation was made based on gender. As one of my interlocutors frequently repeated: ‘Muslim men are far better than their women. Muslim men are decent. Women have no dignity.’

### **Truth will come out**

In reference to the consultations for the RECOM which was held one day before, Milanka, commented that for the first time she heard that representatives of international organisations were interested in Serb victims. ‘It is like with Jasenovac, the truth comes after so many years. It is because it was a matter of Serb victims. It will be the same this time, all the truth will come out.’

Jasenovac and victims of the WW II were a very common point of reference. Women saw not only a parallel between the Serb casualties *then* and *now* (often referred to as the first and the second genocide of the Serb people) but also the impossibility of public mourning and establishing

facts. Milanka points out that during the Tito rule there was no freedom of talking in public about the victims of the Second World War.

Until now nobody could talk about it, for fifty years. Why? Because somebody did not allow it. So that now the label could be taken from Nazis and put on Serbs. So that Germans are not guilty for what happened here but it is Serbs who are guilty, so that one Srebrenica could happen.

Milanka recalled that her mother lost one sister and her three children who were killed by Ustasha during the World War II. She was not able to mourn them in public for fifty years. During the last war, she lost another sister and a brother in law. According to Milanka, again she cannot talk about her loss. The first sister was found and buried, the second one has not been found yet.

Similar family story was presented by several women. They felt that just as during the communist rule the Serbs were not allowed to commemorate their victims, now they are banned for doing this as well. This parallel illustrates what Jansen (2003, p. 218) calls 'Serbian Knowledge', mainly the commonly shared notion that Serbs had historically been victimised. Women narrated displacement and suffering of their families through the prism of the victimhood of the Serb nation.

One woman said that she would like to leave Srebrenica as she is afraid that her daughters or grand daughters will eventually be subjected to the same attacks as she and her ancestors were. My interlocutors made parallels between their suffering in Bosnia and bombardment of Belgrade or war in Kosovo. Those examples were meant to prove that the Serb nation has been a victim of injustice and brutal attacks and the war in Bosnia was just another element of this.

## **Stigma**

While telling the stories of their personal experience women often switched from narration in the first singular to the plural. "I" was changed into "us" and "us" changed into "I" at different moments. This was especially evident when the feeling of injustice and stigma was recalled. There was a shared feeling of Serbs being singled out and presented as genocidal nation, "painted in black". As one woman put it,

Now they say that all three nationalities are citizens of Bosnia: Bosniaks, Serbs and

Muslims. If we are to be citizens now, we should have been citizens then. It should have been announced that there was a genocide done to the citizens of Bosnia. But now when, the whole world has stigmatised Serbs as perpetrators, now they want to make us into citizens. Genocidal RS, it was produced on the genocide on the Serb nation.

Majority of my interlocutors were pointing towards what they felt was injustice done to the Serbian nation. From their perspective, Serbs have been stigmatised, singled out and unjustly condemned by the whole world. Women were foremost referring to the current situation in Bosnia where they feel, only one side of the story is being told. As Milanka put it when describing one of the most popular TV programmes on the Sarajevo-based Federal TV:

“60 Minutes” is a catastrophe, the journalist is a nightmare. He attacks them (Bosniaks) as well but only when they are criminals, never because of Serb victims. But when he mentions a Serb name, he first says 'War criminal' or 'potential war criminal'. They offend Serbs. So every who has Serb name has to be a criminal. Does somebody insist on that or somebody pays for that? One does not know how to stop that. It is horrible.

Another woman felt that it is enough to have a Serb name to be accused of something and put in jail. Several women talk about the process of taking the identification cards from the Serbian men who allegedly were involved in war crimes. After the investigations, in many cases the documents were returned to them as they were freed of charges. A brother of the librarian from Srebrenica was in such a position as for a year and a half he was left without documentation and not able to travel abroad. When asked why that happened, the woman said that she did not know. No explanations were even given. ‘Serbs are being accused without basis. That is what Muslims do; they point fingers at innocent people. And you know when they took their documents? On July 11th! It was not a coincidence; it was all planned this way.’

### **Manipulation with history, Serbs as Nazi**

As, 27 year old Biljana pointed out, the stigmatisation of Serbs goes far beyond assigning them the sole role of criminals in the last war and includes revisionism of the II World War history. She recalled a photo exhibition where a photo showing Jewish children and Nazi soldiers was presented with a caption: ‘Serbs killing Jews’. Biljana explained to the organisers, that Serbs



rescued Jews, not killed them and both nations were victims of Hitler. ‘The whole world knows about Jasenovac!’ she added as an argument for unquestionable victimhood of the Serb nation.

Similarly, Biljana attended a conference about feminism where the speakers talked that the second biggest victim group in the Balkans were Roma. For Biljana these are examples of manipulation of history aimed at presenting Serbs as Nazi. ‘We were victims of Fascism and now they are presented as Fascists! They want to change the history. They show Serbs as criminals. This is the trend.’ Biljana said that being Serb she felt as if she had the word ‘genocide’ written on her forehead. She recalled a German friend who felt the same. ‘So many years after the war, and they still expect people to feel guilty of Holocaust. How long more?’

The most wide spread motif present in almost all the interviews was the sense of injustice done to the Serbian nation both during and after the war. The women were reporting a biased approach of judiciary (represented by the rulings of the ICTY), media (presenting a black and white vision of the war where only Muslim victims and Serbs were perpetrators) and commemorating practices (resources and attention paid to commemorations of the Muslim population with no public space for the Serbian side).

The Tribunal is a political court. It is impossible to give one nation one thousand years and two to the other. Each of them was set free. How come? Serbs were not killing themselves. Oric said that he was defending his nation. How was he defending his nation by entering Serb villages? Is coming into somebody's house and killing people there defending one's nation?

Few women made a reference to a number of years to which criminals of different ethnic group were sentenced by the ICTY: Serbs for over 1000 years and Muslims for over 40 years. This number was widely reported by the Serb media and to the women I spoke to, it proved the bias of the court. Moreover, some of them said that they lost any confidence in the court since the trial of Naser Oric<sup>iii</sup>, who commanded the Army of the Republic of Bosnian and Herzegovina in Srebrenica. Oric, considered a hero and defender by the Bosniak population is perceived a major villain by Bosnian Serbs. In the eyes of my interlocutors, the fact that Oric was responsible for destruction of many Serbian villages in the Srebrenica municipality and a significant war criminal

who should be held responsible for brutal killings of Serb civilians. The fact that he was acquitted served as a proof that the ICTY as well as the international community supported only Muslim victims and did not care for justice for the Serbs. There was a paradox when it came to perception of individual guilt and responsibility for the crimes. On the one hand, majority of the women wished that all the individuals responsible for committing crimes were brought to trials, as one woman put it 'even if they were Serbs, even if that was my own father' but at the same time, the ICTY and other courts were biased. Another woman stated, that since the verdict in the Oric case she 'did not wish to see anyone facing that court'. For other interlocutor, nationality did play a role, as she rhetorically asked, how could she want her Serbs to lay down in jail?

The issue of criminal responsibility illustrates another more interdependence between the Muslims and Serbs, as perceived by the women. Mainly, whenever a question of responsibility and guilt of Radovan Karadzic or Ratko Mladic was mentioned (and that hardly ever came on the initiative of the women) it was always matched by guilt of Bosniak leaders. If Karadzic was to be sentenced, so was Bosniak war time president, if Mladic was a war criminal, so was Oric. In principle women, when asked about responsibility of Serb leadership were mostly reluctant to answer. They often signaled 'not being interested in politics', 'not having been there and not having seen things to judge' or 'not feeling comfortable commenting on the indictees of the ICTY'. Few women openly spoke of Karadzic, Mladic and Milosevic as defenders of the Serb nation who 'did what had to be done'. As one woman put it, 'I understand Mladic. If I had listened to all that cries of despair and howls he did in Srebrenica I would have not done anything else that what he did'. A young student of tourism was confident that 'if it was not for Radovan and Ratko there would be no Serb nation today'. In general, I had an impression that many women were caught in between of what they thought they should be telling and what they probably thought was more truthful. On the one hand, the guilt should be taken from the collectivity of Serbs and assigned to individuals, on the other hand, they were defenders, standing up for and sacrificing for the nation. One woman said that in her view 'Karadzic did not bring anything unworthy to the nation' but soon she reflect that he

should not be hiding as that put Serbs in bad light. In any case, possible guilt or responsibility of Serb leaders was always matched by the one of their Muslim counterparts.

This strategy of matching was evident throughout many of the interviews but appeared only when provoked by my questions. In the part of the meetings, when women were given space to present their narratives the way they wanted to, most of them did not mention names of alleged Serb war criminals at all or spoke very vaguely about how 'those who were doing things' or committed crimes (never specifically mentioned) should appear in courts. When I directly asked about Karadzic or Mladic, answer always came about Oric or Izetbegovic. For my question about Serb men wearing t-shirts with pictures of Serb war criminals during commemorations of 12 July, I heard a reply about Muslim flags covering the town on the day of elections. Similarly, when asked about crimes committed on the Muslim population, women responded with stories of Serb suffering or their individual experiences.

### **I do not know, I have not been there**

A common answer to a question about what happened to Bosniaks was 'I do not know', 'I have not been there', 'I am not sure'. Some women spoke of 'horrible things' done to the Muslims in Srebrenica, 'craziness' and 'lot of suffering'. But those statements were quickly followed by accounts of one's trauma. Whereas when crimes committed against Serb population were in question, women confidently spoke of place, dates, names and gave vivid accounts of events. Two visions of the past were predominant, either Serbs suffered the most or everyone suffered equally. The narrative of Serb victimhood was backed by their personal narratives of displacement, loss and traumatic experiences. It was correct to talk about Serbs suffering during that war as they have experienced it themselves. One woman, when asked about crimes committed against the Muslim population, answered that she cannot talk about it as she has not been there nor seen it and she talks only about the things she is 100% sure. That did not stop her from giving vivid accounts of crimes committed in the Serb villages although she has not been there neither. Similarly, majority of

women did not call the mass murder in July 1995 genocide. For some, it was based on the fact that they did not believe in the number of victims claimed at the Memorial Centre, others said that they 'were not professionals to judge this sort of things'. In general, genocide was understood as annihilation of an entire nation, that "could not have happened here as all the women and children were safely evacuated. If all the Muslims in Bosnia were killed, that would have been genocide". When I asked this particular woman for examples of genocide she replied with Jasenovac and Holocaust. I asked why Jasenovac, where not the entire Serb nation was killed was considered it a genocide while Srebrenica was not? She just re-affirmed that Srebrenica was not.

Several women tended to deny being deniers. Statements like 'It happened, I am not saying that it did not' or 'I know that there were victims among Muslims' came into interviews often not provoked by my questions but rather awareness of the fact, that Serb are labeled as 'camp of deniers' rejecting truth about genocide. In this sense, my interlocutors intended to prove their integrity and interest in truth by acknowledging that 'things happened' and at the same time to show that they are ready to speak about Muslim victims whereas 'they' do not admit Serb civilian casualties.

### ***Construction of narratives***

In the story of war events in Srebrenica events of July 1995 did not occupy the most important position. First, for many women their personal experiences were the most important and that is what they were focusing during the first part of the interviews. The first question: when did the war begin for you? Was met with different answers. Some women talked about the experience of sudden, unprepared departure, abandoning their homes and beginning of a period of instability, being separated from their families. For many women the experience of worrying about young children was the most important and most painful. The sense of responsibility for the survival of children and sudden lack of men to take care of them occupied the main place in personal memories. For many women the time spent in Serbia, without houses, families, income was the

crucial feeling. Few women however decided to explain the political and historical background before telling their private stories. That was especially heard in the stories of women who lost husbands or other members of close families.

The second place in many of the stories was occupied by the suffering of the Bosnian Serbs during the war. Women spoke at length about destroyed Serbian villages and killed civilians. At this point, the genocide of 1995 was mentioned but more as a point of reference than an event itself. The war was always phrased and explained in terms of defense from the attacks of the Muslim side. It was usually talked about from the perspective of the current commemoration practices in at the Memorial Centre in Potocari. This insisting on putting the massacre of Muslim men in the context of attacks on the Serb villages in the previous years was a clear reflection of the commemorative activities and explanations provided by the Serb leadership. It was explained not as an organised and planned mass crime but result of fighting, mines, confrontation.

This is the version presented in the official Serb discourse, inscribed in the commemorative ceremonies and promoted by the media. At the same time, it is confirmed by the personal memories of the women and gives a meaning to their war experiences: they had to leave their houses, lost members of families, some were wounded. What was however equally important is that male members of their families: husbands, brothers, fathers and sons fought in the war, actively participated in the confrontations. None of the women presents it this way. Those who mention men in their families as members of the Bosnian Serb army assure that they were either responsible for internal communication or logistics (as one of my Muslim friends sarcastically commented: all the Serbs were either drivers or cooks. Who fought then?). Few women stressed several times that it was very important to them, that nobody in their families “had blood on their hands”. At the same time, women, whose husbands were involved in military actions talked only about them coming home hungry and tired. They said that they had not asked what they did but knew that ‘they did nothing wrong.’ One young woman told me how much it cost her to ask her father about what he did during the war. She felt relief when heard that he had not killed anybody. ‘He did however see

many men being killed. Serb men.'

This question of involvement of relatives in the fighting makes acceptance of guilt for the war especially difficult. None of the women would be ready to admit that somebody from her family was killing innocent people. In order for families to function and make sense of the engagement, they need to believe that the war fought was a defensive war. It was protection, not attack.

### ***Transmission of memory***

The issue of children having to live with the baggage of difficult past of their parents or their own painful memories is one of the crucial elements in the debate about transmission and creation of collective memory. During the research, in three cases I had a chance to interview both mothers and daughter and this way compare the visions of the war past and its legacy of two generations. Through these interviews yet another vision emerged: memory of war encoded in geography and spatial divisions. In this part of the paper I present both.

When asked about their memories of war, Biljana and Mikica, who were ten and eleven when war broke out, tell stories of what was the most important to them at that time: Biljana's, long awaited birthday party was cancelled as her father unexpectedly ordered the family to move to Serbia; Mikica, who also had to suddenly leave her house did not manage to pack her favourite doll. They tell the story of war in pictures and small events and encounters. Biljana remembers that her father used to make wooden figures and sell them whenever he came home from the front line. She remembers being poor, wearing old clothes and too big shoes which she got from somebody. Mikica recalls a strange encounter with a Muslim boy from Srebrenica, whom she met on a staircase of the building where she lived in Belgrade. She did not know why but she felt that she should not speak to him and turned her head away. As their mothers, young women spoke of uncomfortable stay in houses of other people, lack of money, and separation from fathers. The third woman I spoke to does not remember her father, she was four year old when the Muslims killed him in Srebrenica.

The stories of the young women to a certain extent reflected those of their mothers. The woman who lost her father did not want to talk much about the past. However she had very strong view on what was going on in Srebrenica now: town was controlled by Muslims, it was separated into Muslim and Serb places and she would never buy in a Muslim shop. People from Sarajevo and Tuzla (considered Muslim cities) came to Srebrenica to work and there was no employment for the local population. In her story, I could hear reflection of her mother's bitter vision of the past and the present: Serbs are discriminated in Srebrenica, they were victims-not perpetrators of genocide, they have always been minority here and always had to defend themselves. Both women would like to leave: mother to Serbia, daughter- anywhere. Similarly, stories of Biljana and her mother resembled each other. They were centered on a figure of father, who was respected both by Serbs and Muslims, was a great professional, a very kind person. He died of cancer in 2001 but Biljana blamed his death on exhaustion and lack of medical care during the war. Both mother and daughter were convinced that Serbs fought a defensive war against ever more radical Islam. Biljana saw proofs of it in the number of mosques built in Sarajevo classes of Islam introduced in kindergartens in Sarajevo, veiled women walking on the streets. Sarajevo was the city of her childhood but she would not want to go back there. Just like the primer minister of RS, she called it Teheran, a Muslim city. She remembers walking on the streets and noticing people staring at her because she was wearing a little cross on her neck. The Bosnian capital was considered a foreign country by many women. Those, who lived there before the war spoke about the city with nostalgia. That old city was gone, now there were no Serbs. But there were also less and less old Muslim inhabitants, as Milanka pointed. The city was overtaken by villagers who brought their red neck fashion; there was no space even for the old, good Muslims. Women commented on the fact that just few weeks ago a new, so far the biggest shopping mall was opened in Sarajevo. Since it was sponsored by an Islamic Bank, no alcohol or pork could be sold there. What Serbs can look for there? Asked Milanka.

Other women had more radical views: some warned against dangers awaiting Serbs who want

to go to Federation: “a Serb will never experience anything good there”. There were stories of Serb women being attacked on the streets. For my interlocutors Sarajevo was an ethnically cleansed city, not a capital of a country, but rather main Muslim city.

In case of Biljana and Mikica, they felt that they knew more than their mothers did. They spent a lot of time reading about what happened in Srebrenica and Bosnia. Biljana talked about watching, reading and listening about horrific crimes committed by Serbs: ‘I caught myself thinking that Serbs were animals. It was clear to me why the whole world thought this way. I started thinking that it was truth.’ She said that she monitored what was written about Bosnia internationally. ‘We could watch what was happening here from outside: as if we were, and were not here’. She was tired of all the foreigners coming to Srebrenica and explaining to the local population what had happened here.

Foreigner researchers come here and explain to us what happened here! I remember how one foreign journalist came to me thirteen years after the war, and asked if I could talk to Muslims after all that we had done to them. And I asked: we? He said: you, Serbs.

She complained that it was all exaggerated, painted in black and white, commercialised. ‘My German friend told me that they teach them to be guilty of Holocaust. Now they expect us to say that we are guilty, that I accept this collective guilt. I have tried that as well but that was not sincere.’ In case of Biljana extensive research she did on the war resulted in disgust and rejection of the vision presented in the international media and academia. This was an a very telling proof that it is not lack of information and knowledge that makes people reject the facts about the past. Biljana read and watched a lot and since she worked for a United Nations agency she was exposed to reports and encounters with both international and Bosnian researchers and officials. Biljana had enough information about what happened. Still, publications and interpretations she came across did not include what she remembered and knew from her family. She did not find information about brutality of Muslim forces, tortures of Serb population. She did not see Naser Oric, responsible for attack on one village in which her uncle was killed, sentenced. She did not see justice so she started to reject whatever she was told.



Mikica equally was haunted by a need to discover what happened in Srebrenica. Just like Biljana she searched Internet, books, films. Just like Biljana she did not hear much from her parents who were reluctant to talk about the war. It was Mikica who started informing her mother about what happened in Srebrenica (they spent war in Belgrade). She made her mother watch films about the atrocities committed by Serbs and they cried together. Mother asked her not to tell it to anyone. It was the daughter who insisted on talking about the past and confronted mother with information and pictures of brutality. Mikica shared Biljana's frustration over the fact that only one side of the conflict was portrayed as criminals and that losses of only one nation were acknowledged. At the same time, she was much more critical of her nation, its past and current leaders and the story of war they presented. "If being Serb means being blindly faithful to a tribe then I do not want to be Serb". Mikica's mother, a very nice and calm woman defended Milosevic and Karadzic for protecting their nation. Mikica accused them of destroying her life and committing war crimes. When Mikica's mother said that she did not remember if back in 1991 she had voted in the independence referendum, Mikica said that she remembered perfectly her parents dressed elegantly and leaving the house in order to vote. Mother, caught on lie, insisted that she did not remember how she voted. Mikica, irritated by her mother's lies, said she voted against independence. For every "I do not know, I have not been here" of her mother, Mikica insisted on finding out the truth. For her, there was no excuse for not trying to find out. "It is my destroyed childhood that we are talking about, I need to know". This meeting illustrated a phenomena where children insist on confronting their parents with difficult memories and making sense of them out of the given frameworks and ready-made explanations.

Jovana, woman who lost her father, Biljana and Mikica all wanted to know the truth about the past. The first woman seemed to be satisfied with the story presented by her mother and the national narrative present everywhere. Her personal memory of war: loss of father, poverty, insecurity perfectly fitted into the narrative of Serb victimhood and their attempts of defense. This was only confirmed by what she could observe in Srebrenica: Muslims holding the highest positions in the

town (which is more of an exaggeration and comes to a fact that the mayor of the city is Muslim while most of the important positions are held by Serbs), donations for reconstruction of houses given only to Muslims, impunity of Muslim war criminals.

Biljana tried to learn more about what happened from foreign sources, books and reports. What she found out was that none of them included descriptions of the reality that she remembered and experienced. Instead she felt stigmatised and manipulated. This made her reject most of what she learnt.

Mikica keeps on trying to make sense of what she found out. Putting the puzzle of what she knows from her own experience, what she learns from the media and reads on the Internet. She said that she started doubting everything, does not know whom to trust. The picture of the past is every day more confusing. When she told her story, she was very carefully choosing words and was extremely aware of their meaning. When asked about what happened on 11 July 1995, she answered: "From the perspective of my nation, Srebrenica was liberated. From the perspective of Muslims: it fell". When I asked what happened from *her* perspective, she answered: "I do not know".

## **Conclusions**

The elements of narratives and strategies of constructing stories outlined above point towards various ways in which memories of the women are shaped and influenced. The predominant sense of stigmatisation, absence of agency,

Several main conclusions are apparent. First, while constructing their narratives women engage in a confrontation with the vision of the past advocated by the Muslim side. They use examples of their personal experiences both as a confirmation of the Serb national narrative, and as a proof that interpretation of the war presented by Bosniaks does not correspond or does not include their memories of the war reality. The Serb national narrative, in which Serbs fought a defensive war, offers them a framework in which engagement of their male members of the family can be securely

explained and morally justified. I agree with Bloch's argument that there is a reciprocal relationship between individual and collective memory: national narrative gives meaning to the memories of the women, but at the same time it is accepted only because it corresponds to their experiences.

Second, women narrate their past from the perspective of their current experience and the way they perceive the social and political situation in Bosnia. In this way, the sense of discrimination against Serbs experienced as biased verdicts of the ICTY, media manipulation and stigmatisation of the Serb nation influence their interpretation of the war events and constitute a proof that in 1992, Serbs were attacked as they are attacked these days.

The analysis point towards a significant impact the activities in the commemorative arena have on the women. Sense of denial of victimhood, feeling of being voiceless and dominant position of the Muslim discourse result in distrust of any sources of information that do not fit into the Serb national narrative.

# Serb Narrative of war

## *Vision of war*

In the eyes of almost all the interviewed women, between 1992 and 1995 Serbs fought a defensive war. Majority of my interlocutors had no doubts that Bosnian Serbs had to defend themselves from the attempts of Bosnian Muslim leaders who wanted to turn the country into a 'Islamic Republic'. As one of the women explained, when asked who bares responsibility for the war:

I think that this was foreign countries. They supported the idea of a Muslim country in Bosnia-Herzegovina. You (Serbs) will be all destroyed; nothing will be left of you. Serbs had to defend themselves, Serbs were only defending themselves.

For the women who had the most radical views about the war, it was clear, that it were Muslims who wanted the war to happen and who had the most to gain from it. As they explain,

They entered the war as Muslims, speaking Serbo-Croatian and left it as Bosniaks speaking some sort of Bosnian language: that is one way of explaining who wanted this war. Everyone says that Serbs wanted the war. Why I, as a Serb would want that war? I had my language, my nation, my culture, my country- common country. I am not saying that it was mine. I was a Serb, stayed a Serb and left the war as a Serb.

The war was perceived as a nation-building exercise of the Muslim population. Radojka, a president of a victim organisation recalled how one of her Muslim pre-war colleagues used to introduce herself as a Muslim Serb and after the war she turned into a Bosniak. Radojka pointed out that her colleague had an ancient Serb surname, which proved that she came from an old Serb family that was forced to convert into Islam by the Ottoman rulers. That showed that the Bosniak nation was ersatz and that in reality all of them were Serbs.

They were Muslims before the war, now they call themselves Bosniaks but in my opinion they change with the wind. Until 1974 they introduced themselves as Orthodox. Which was not true as we, Serbs are Orthodox. That was until 1992, when they became Bosnians. While in reality we are all Bosnians, only that we are of Serbian nationality.

Several women blamed the war on the nationalistic leaders, mainly those who wanted independence of the republics. According to one of the women, Alija Izetbegovic was offered a

post of the president of Yugoslavia, which he rejected. 'Everyone knows that he wanted to sacrifice peace and so he did. It is clear who started the war. It is clear as a day. It was all politicians; one should never blame the common people.' She blamed 'the crazy six' (presidents of the republics of the former Yugoslavia), among them Izetbegovic, Tudjman and Milosevic for being manipulated into a war.

Other women blamed 'others', 'foreign powers' and America for bringing war to Yugoslavia. It was commonly agreed that the 'common people' did not want that war and that it was decided outside of Bosnia. Common people were not guilty and should not be blamed for anything. It was forces from "outside" who came and destroyed Srebrenica. When asked where were those forces from, women were not able to answer.

The central part of the narrative of majority of the women was occupied by the Serb victims and losses in Srebrenica. In this narrative, Serbs in Srebrenica were a minority and became targets of brutal attacks of Muslim soldiers. From 1992 all the Serb villages in the Srebrenica municipality were attacked, destroyed and burnt. The Serb population was brutally tortured and killed. One interviewee began her account by saying that 'In 1992 Muslims started an action aiming to kill all the Serbs. Attacking on important holidays, killing everything what moved: animals, men, women, children, old men.'

According to other, some Serbs were grilled, tortured, corps of others were eaten by pigs. 'They were killing whatever Serbs they found, they burnt them alive.'

Names of few destroyed villages came to symbolise the violence: Kravice, Zalazje, Skelani. Although in those places Muslim population has also experienced brutal attacks by the Serb side, those victims were never mentioned. For many of the women I spoke to, especially those who lost their relatives in one of the destroyed villages, those were the most important events of the war and they could provide vivid and detailed accounts of all the suffering endured by Serbs there as well as the cruelty of Muslim forces. Some spoke of genocide committed on the Serb nation.

For other women, the casualties from those villages served to make a point that 'there were

victims on both sides'. At this point two interpretations were predominant: one, according to which the Serbs were the biggest victims of the war, and the second which insisted that *crimes were committed by everyone* and that the both sides were equally guilty.

The fact that many Serb bodies have not yet been found or identified was of great importance to many women, especially those who were waiting to bury their dead ones. This was presented as a one more point about the cruelty of the Bosnian Muslims. At the same time there was not mentioning of the Bosniak victims from the town. In the first months of the war, a number of Muslims were murdered in town, several of the burnt alive in their houses in the centre of the town. Dozen of children were killed by grenades while playing in front of the school. None of those events was included in the narrative of the war in Srebrenica presented by the Serb women. One of them, when explicitly asked if she knew about those victims replied that is not true. 'You see how they do it slowly? No Muslim was killed in Srebrenica before it became a protected enclave. And how could anyone be killed when it was a protected zone? They were killing each other and blaming that on Serbs.'

The siege of Srebrenica does not occupy much place in the majorities of the stories, except for the part about the Serb victims mentioned above. There is no talk of Srebrenica being under siege, it was surrounded by the Bosnian Serb army in order to protect the Serb villages from the attacks launched by the Muslims from the town. Women were aware that the population of the town grew drastically since thousands of Bosniaks fled there from villages. Several women could not explain why all those Muslims came to town. Other spoke of "military tactics", "political arrangements" and "strategies" when explaining the fact that the town was surrounded by the Serb soldiers. They did not mention daily attacks on the town and referred to the situation in terms of containing Muslim attacks on the villages.

What was important to the interviewees, was the fact that despite proclaiming Srebrenica in 1993 a demilitarised zone protected by the UN, the attacks on the Serb villages continued from the town. That was a proof that not all the Muslims gave up their weapons and continued attacking

Serb population. That lasted until in July 1995, Bosnian Serb army led by Ratko Mladic entered Srebrenica. In the Bosniak and international discourse, this event is referred to as 'the fall of Srebrenica'. From the point of view of my interlocutors, Srebrenica was liberated.

It all lasted until April 1993 when Srebrenica was a protected zone but it continued only on smaller scale. All the Serb villages were attacked by those people of Srebrenica who now talk only about July 1995. They were not disarmed. Then came July 1995. I do not justify what happened. But I cannot denied that it was some sort of natural consequence of what was happening before.

July 1995 does not occupy a very important place in the narrative of the war and is referred to in a vague terms. It is being talked about as “something horrible”, “what happened down there”, “all that stupidity”. Most importantly, it is presented as something that was to be expected, natural development and consequence of the attacks on the Serb population.

Almost all the women expressed regret about what happened in Potocari but did not considered it as something that was viciously planned or organised: “I do not want to go into what happened in 1995 but personally I do not think that anybody gave such an order.”

According to one of the women, in July 1995, Serbs *left* Srebrenica.

Some were forced, some not but in general they left. Some alive, some not. I cannot say, it was horrible what happened and I would never wish anything like that to anyone but nothing was bigger and more horrible than what happened to Serbs in the period before.

It is understood that what happened in Srebrenica in July 1995 was a result of some sort of political arrangements and agreements that involved leaders of the fighting sides as well as representatives of foreign powers involved in the war. One woman mentioned that she keeps at home a newspaper article from the biggest Bosnian daily from few years ago where the headline read: “Alija sold everything”. “There are some people who say that openly, in public. They had some arrangement“. According to other woman, no one can say that the Muslims in Srebrenica were killed without the previous permission from the Bosnian Army. “There were too many victims and events to think that this could have happened just like that.”

As far as human losses in the war were considered, few women explained that numerically,

there were more Muslim victims as they represented bigger population. Since Serbs belonged to minority, there were less Serb victims. However, if the ratio of number of victims to the size of population is examined, women concluded that “there were almost the same proportions of victims on both sides”.

Here Serbs were always killed. Their people were also killed, that is war. Who is stronger then kills. They say that there were less Serb victims but we were less numerous population. Same in proportions.

When it comes to the nature of the war, interviewed women have do doubts that it was a civil war, not an aggression of Serbia as it is presented by the Bosniak side. One of the women stated that she did not understand why Milosveic was indicted for things that happened in Bosnia. Serbian government played no role in the war and if there were Serbs from Serbia fighting in Bosnia, they came to help their brothers. As one woman pointed out: Croats in Croatia were helped by Germany and other strong countries, Bosnian Muslims were helped by Muslim Countries, Bosnian Serbs could count only on Serbia.

According to one of the women, Serbs organised themselves in a territorial defense and were trying to defend their villages from the Muslim attacks. As a result there were casualties on the Muslim side. Other interviewee claimed that there were many of those who were trying to escape through the forests in July 1995 and died on the mine fields. She does not agree that they should be considered as killed by the Serbs. What was important for many women was the fact that Muslim women and children were transported by buses and lorries to the territories under the Bosniak control. This was an argument against the claim that Serbs were responsible for genocide. Except for one interviewee, no woman agreed that there was a genocide committed. Several women strongly opposed accusations that Muslim women were raped and gang raped by the Serbs “Those women were dirty and stinky. What man would put his hands on such a woman?”

This way, Oric came to symbolise both the suffering of the Serbs during the war and the injustice and bias experienced afterwards.



I think that all the criminals should be brought to courts. But when Naser (Oric) burnt all the Serb villages, he got two years. How could I now wish for one of our Serbs to lay down there (in prison) when their walk around?

Similarly, judgments of Radovan Karadzic are made in relation to the war time Muslim president, Alija Izetbegovic: 'They think he (Karadzic) is guilty, I think that he is not. If Alija (Izetbegovic) had to defend his nation so did Karadzic. The truth and justice will come. The process is hard and slow but it will come.' The judgment of the Serb leaders differed significantly from woman to woman. For some, Milosevic, Karadzic and Mladic were defenders of the Serb nation and national heroes. 'If it was not for Slobodan, Radovan and Mladko there would be no Serb nation today'. For others, they were war criminals responsible for the war and destruction. Interestingly, one woman mentioned that Mladic's daughter was killed, which somehow was meant to explain his actions during and after the war. In reality, Mladic daughter committed suicide after learning that her father was responsible for committing war crimes.

That happens to us here as we are a minority here. That happens to us repeatedly, in every war we pay a great price. If I only had money I would leave Srebrenica. I would go to Serbia, it is more secure there. Maybe tomorrow my children will be killed here. It was always this way here, we are a minority here.

No body likes Serbs. You saw Jasenovac? The same they hated Jews. Their aim is to destroy us. If it was not for Russia that always protects us we would be long gone.

This narrative and vision of the war should not be treated as a coherent, homogenous story. It is more of a selection of certain motifs and elements that are predominant in the Serb public discourse. Certainly it has to be mentioned that many of those opinions, interpretations and information are challenged within the group as well than many individuals from both national groups do not agree with the vision of the war supported by their national leaders. The national narrative sketched above is simplified and reduced and they does not include many nuances advocated by historians, researchers, activists and individuals from both sides. However, at the same time, it presents the elements that do occupy the most place in the media, literature, political spectrum and commemorative arena of the respective national groups and as such are the dominant historic frameworks available to members of both national groups.

## ***The public discourse***

Bosnia-Herzegovina, despite the territorial and administrative division into two entities is one independent country. That means that it has a common political state level arena, media outlets that cover the whole country and many institutions and networks covering the entire population. At the same time, the government and the state parliament are scenes of confrontations of nationalistic parties, each of them advocating agendas of the national groups they represent. Similarly, the educational system is divided into de facto two systems in two respective entities: predominantly Bosniak-Croat Federation and predominantly Serb-Republika Srpska<sup>iv</sup>. As a result children attending schools in different parts of the country learn the history (and other subjects) according to different curriculums (these can be either Bosniak, Serb or Croat), where different versions and interpretations of the past are promoted. Consequently, in Srebrenica municipality children attending the same school but in two branches respectively have classes of Serb language or Bosnian language. As far as media is concerned, members of particular national groups tend to follow media outlets that lean towards their visions of the past and the present simultaneously distrusting reports presented by TV stations and newspapers associated with other ethnic group (this is illustrated in the further part of this chapter. This division often coincides with the geographical location of the media outlets: Sarajevo based television stations, newspapers and magazines are more likely to be trusted by Bosniaks, whereas Serbs tend to watch and read media reports from stations and newspapers of Republika Srpska or Serbia.

As a result of the described divisions, members of each national group have a chance to be exposed to the narrative of the other side to a very limited extent. It is possible to live in Bosnia and hear only stories, information and opinions that confirm the vision of both past and present adjusted to the national vision of one's group. This is not to say that the separation is complete and strict. Certainly both national groups have access to points of view and narratives of their counterparts and do follow them. However, when a question of reliability is asked, the answers

often confirm the division. Media associated with the other national group are often monitored in so far as they are considered biased and not trustworthy when the matter of politics, war or ethnic divisions is concerned.

## Conclusions

Since the end of the last war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, certain Bosnian and international intellectuals have argued that if Muslims, Serbs, and Croats in Bosnia cannot reach agreement on how to remember events such as the Srebrenica massacre and fail to develop mechanisms to establish a shared narrative about the war, it is difficult to see how the country can continue to exist (Duijzings 2007, p. 143). At the same time, other scholars arrived at the conclusion, that Muslims and Serbs are reluctant, even hostile to attempts to come to a balanced and shared understanding of the past (ibid. p. 144). It is between those two assumptions that the collective memory in Bosnia is being shaped and re-shaped.

International community by assigning with only one side of the conflict and trying to impose its vision of what Srebrenica represents, ignores the fact that in Bosnian, there are many visions of the events of July 1995. Certainly the attempts of denying the fact that the massacre took place should not be a point of debate. But at the same time, even for those who acknowledge the crime and its scale, Srebrenica may represent many different things (and it is important here to point out heterogeneity of interpretations not only among but also within particular national groups). I agree with Duijzings, that there is a danger in the way the international community shapes the commemorations in Srebrenica and its attempts to keep Bosnia together (p.163). I would be however careful in accepting his advice to give a 'free reign of expression of conflicting memories' (p.166). Duijzings may be right arguing that plurality of voices and expressions is certainly more desired than a version of the pasts imposed from above (and paradoxically, we have not learnt from Tito's mistaken approach to teaching history as much as we think we have), however I do not agree that these are the only two options for organising public remembrance. I believe that rather opting for one of the approaches, we should look for a ways of engaging in the processes of shaping of collective memories, by underestimating dynamics of this process and identifying moments when it

can be influenced.

Wolfgang Petrich, the OHR who initiated establishment of the Memorial Centre linked it directly to the process of return and reconciliation. He was right in this sense, that opening of the Memorial Centre marked a symbolic re-establishment of the Muslim population in Srebrenica and enhanced the process of physical return of IDPs and refugees. Without presence of one side of the conflict, how can one even consider reconciliation? For the Muslim community in Bosnia, it, most probably, also served as a help in the process of reconciliation, not with the Serb side, but with their internal grief and pain. Reconciliation may be understood both as a process taking place between two conflicted sides, as well as a process of coming in terms with one's painful past and arriving at the point of a certain closure. Franjovic (2006) argues that from the conflict prevention perspective, the latter is actually a more important element of establishing sustainable peace. To expect one to reconcile with a criminal responsible for committing horrific atrocities may be too much, especially if that criminal is in the state of denial. What is however to a certain extent possible, and more important for peace, is supporting the process of one's reconciliation with his or her past in a sense of not looking for revenge. In this sense, the value of commemorations as a form of symbolic justice is substantial and the Memorial Centre in Potocari can contribute.

At the same time however, the fact that so much international support is given to the Muslim public remembering with simultaneous neglecting of the Serb commemorations, as it was illustrated in this paper, may influence process of reconciliation, understood in its classical meaning, in a manner counter to the desired one.

### **Implications of the study, recommendations for further research**

The fact that the Serb women from Srebrenica presented an account of war, in which the centre place was occupied by the Serb victimhood, and suffering did not come as a surprise. Nor was it astonishing to see that they eagerly embraced a nationalistic narrative of the conflict which provided them with a comfortable and comforting framework of interpretation of the events.

Nobody wants to see himself as a perpetrator, nobody wants to belong to a group responsible of genocide. Even the fact that women interpret their past from the perspective of their current experiences and perceptions is not a novelty in itself. What is then importance of collective memory?

The main argument holds that in order to reduce spread of chauvinistic, false and revisionist visions of the war and to challenge the process of creation of nationalistic myths about war heroes, who were larger than life and only defended the eternal Serb victims, the main approaches to employment of memory politics and commemorative activities in the field of reconciliation and conflict prevention need to be reevaluated or, at least, their impact on the conflicted populations reexamined.

### **Symbolic justice**

When it comes to societies struggling with legacy of mass human rights abuses, Bosnia can learn from countries which have undergone such a process and where certain strategies have been adopted. Since the '1980, the field of transitional justice has observed a significant development an expansion. As a result of it, a certain vision of desired form of passage from the time of mass scale abuse to the stage of peaceful, democratic society has been promoted. One of the key elements of this passage is establishing and public acknowledging truth about painful and violent past. This has taken many forms, the most spectacular being Truth and Reconciliation Commissions established around the world in order to investigate past crimes and provide space for the victims to voice their grief. Truth Commissions and focus on public acknowledgment of past abuses became somehow a standard procedure promoted in majority of the societies facing legacy of violent past. They commonly came to be considered a precondition for lasting peace and prosperity. An argument contrary to this holds, that sometimes extensive pursuing of truth about the past and justice for the victims of violent regimes may jeopardise the reconciliation processes as it brings back conflictive memories and further divides societies. Advocates of this approach often quote the example of

Spain, which successfully completed the process of transition from authoritarian regime known for brutal prosecution of opposition to a established democracy where human rights are respected. This process was accomplished without any truth commissions or public acknowledgement of past abuses. In fact, Spain chose the path of collective public amnesia, named *pacto del olvido* (pact of forgetting). After the death of general Franco, Spanish leadership decided that the democratisation process was too fragile to openly address the painful legacy of the dictatorship, the price could be too high.

The author of this thesis does not believe that in regards to transitional justice there are instances of history when a choice: justice or peace has to be made. This is a false choice both in the sphere of punishing perpetrators of crimes and compensation for victims as well as in the symbolic sphere of commemorating events and the memory of the endured suffering.

For many victims in Bosnia, symbolic justice is the only form of justice they will ever experience. In this sense, the importance of commemorations is of a great value and importance. Many of them will not see perpetrators responsible for the crimes committed on their dear ones ever brought to jail, nor will they receive reparations or any other form of compensation for their losses. The only form of justice they can count on is public acknowledgment of their suffering and dignified commemoration of the endured suffering.

In this matter, the annual commemorations in the Memorial Center in Potocari are an expression of symbolic justice done to the families of perished Muslim men and boys. These commemorations, as well as the very existence of the Memorial Centre, may make some Serbs feel uncomfortable. However, the fact that Serb part of the local population is uneasy about the July 11 events should not be a reason for not honoring memory of innocent victims. Some truths, no matter how uncomfortable and painful need to be spelled out and their memory preserved.

At the same time, the fact that these commemorations contribute to the further division of the local community should also not be ignored. If commemorating is a part of transitional justice aimed at reconciliation among the Bosnian population, but in reality it results in further process of

drifting apart of different national groups, a critical examination of the process should be inaugurated.

It is not the commemorating act itself that is the key problem in Srebrenica but its form and its placement in the memory arena.

The international community aims at overcoming ethnic divisions in Bosnia and argues that the war of 1992-1995 was not an *ethnic*, but *ethnically framed* conflict. But at the same time, the politics of memory supported by the foreign diplomats, representatives of international organisations, activists and intellectuals are presented in ethnic frames and enhance national belonging of victims and perpetrators. It would be an overstatement to call this phenomena paradoxical. I do not think that it is a result of consciously planned policies aimed at reifying of national boundaries, but rather the fact that the reality on the ground, in Bosnia is an *ethnic reality* and has to be dealt with as such. Representatives of international community may intend to speak of perpetrators and victims without 'national-prefix' but those prefixes are always present implicitly. Whether they are spelled out or not. Ethnicity did play a significant role in the war of 1992-1995 and thus cannot be ignored in its remembering.

There are no simple answers to the problem of commemorating violent wars. On the one hand, it seems desired to insist on unburdening the categories applied in description of the war of the ethnic affiliation. One should like to see commemorations of all *victims* rather than exclusive *Muslim* or *Serb victims*. On the other hand, there is a risk of falling into a trap of revisionism of history and blurring the picture of what happened. One should take into account the narratives of Serb population and their quest for inclusion of their experiences into the public discourse. At the same time however, one should not fall into the trap of questioning and challenging established facts. From the point of view of many Serbs, they were victims of genocide in Srebrenica- from the point of view of established facts, genocide was committed on the Bosniak population. These two narratives should not be given equal weight. How then commemorations and politics of memory should be approached? The findings of this research suggest at least three steps that ought to be



taken in order to minimise the alienating effect of the commemorating arena in Srebrenica and the process of myth-building of the Serb population: critical examination of the commemorative arena and the effects it has on the collective memory of the Serbs.

We need to be realistic: Serb national myth of the war will remain. The sense of victimhood, injustice and denial of facts will not disappear from the Serb collective memory. This research proved that much of the interpretation of the war events comes from the experience of today's life. Experienced and perceived injustice or discrimination in the field of receiving donations, acquittal of Naser Oric by the ICTY, feeling of stigmatisation and denial of Serb civilian victims contribute to the Serb vision of the past as a struggle for survival and self-defense. At the same time however, it would be naive to believe that more just policy of distribution of donations, bigger number of Bosniak officers sentenced by the courts for crimes committed against Serb population and more space in the public discourse provided to the Serb victims would dramatically reshaped the vision of the past currently shared by big segment of the Serb population. It is not that Serb women consider themselves victims of the war because they do not receive donations for reconstruction of their burnt houses. However the fact, that they do not receive those donations, that they are not listened to and that they cannot publicly voice their grief does enhance the memory of the collective war suffering and provides opportunities for nationalistic leaders to spread their message of inherent injustice and eternal victimhood of the Serb nation. Although such myths will not be eliminated, their power may be reduced. And I think that politics of memory and commemorations, if more inclusive, can play a significant role in this process.

The aim of this paper was to outline the ways in which individual and collective memory of Serb women is being shaped. I have tried to identify what are the sources of knowledge, points of reference and frameworks they use while giving importance to their personal experiences. At the same time, I tried to present and critically analyse the politics of memory in Srebrenica, its dynamics, actors and most importantly, its impact on the memory of the women. From those two

parts it can be seen that the relationship between the way Serb women and their stories exist (or are absent) in the commemorative arena is strongly reflected in the way in which they construct their memories and interpret the war. This link can be considered an important opportunity for engaging with the process of remembering of Serb population. The only point here is that they should not be approached as a camp of deniers who should at any cost be convinced that their vision of the past is wrong. Some of them, the most radical will never be convinced. That is however not entire population, and especially that does not include the future generations. The Serb population should be approached as a heterogeneous group in which people have their doubts, do not agree about everything, share certain beliefs and visions and as any group- seek comfort and sense of security from the fact that they belong to a group. This means that there are people who have a wide spectrum of interpretations and visions of the past war. Some have it very clear and internalise the national narrative completely seeing their personal experiences as confirmation of the bigger framework. Others seek answers and try to make sense of what happened both in their private lives and in the broader context, in the life of the community they belonged to. Those people are the battle ground on which propagators of different visions of the past fight their battle. Those advocating national Serb narrative have it easier: the product they offer is tailored for those clients. It offers easy explanations of complex problems, takes away the burden of responsibility and presents group they belong to in a good light. Additionally, they have an efficient outreach programme as they can count on national media, school textbooks, and commemorations of Serb victims. Through these channels, myths of war are being distributed and incorporated in the memories of people. The women I spoke to in Srebrenica learnt and understood what happened to them from media, books, politicians and their daily experience of lack of agency. If Muslim women say that there were no civilian Serb victims and one's disabled mother in law was killed in her apartment or she still cannot find remains of her husband, then one has a good reason to distrust all that is said by Muslim women.

Living in shadow of genocide, the worst mass murder since Holocaust, symbol of aggression

is not easy. One looks for strategies of coping with that. Eventually, it is a choice of each individual to acknowledge genocide or not.

Of course exaggeration of Serb victim is a part of a denial strategy. Women choose those moments from the history that fit into the narrative they want to share. In order for the genocide of July 1995 to look less dramatic, they invest a lot of effort in presenting the story of Serbs villages being destroyed, and the Serb population persecuted as the main event of the war.

Bosnia is currently undergoing a process of nation building. Attempts to enhance a state-based, not ethnic-based, overarching identity are advocated mostly by the Muslim intellectual elites and officials. Such a 'Bosnian' identity would prove that multiethnic, independent Bosnia has a chance to overcome legacy of a brutal war that was waged against this vision. The idea has so far been enthusiastically embraced only by the Bosniaks. The Serb, and to a lesser extent the Croats refer to stay in the safety of ethnic alliances. No matter how slowly this nation building process is going it will have little chances to succeed if the Serb population will be excluded. This is what I observed in Srebrenica. The Serb women were left aside as 'deniers' and members of 'genocidal nation'. There was no word of comfort offered to them by anyone, except for nationalistic leaders seeking political legitimacy. The Serb women share a sense of rejection, frustration and being voiceless. Scan the horizon and there is no sign of cure.

Miller (2006, p.319) admits that he is worried about the ways memory about Srebrenica could become hardened and politicised into dogma about the past, before the past could be truly understood in its historical complexity. I am afraid that this has already happened. While trying to avoid Tito's mistake of imposing one and only interpretation of the World War II and shrinking the commemorative arena to two ideological categories of fascists and partisans, the current political and moral leaders fell into the same trap. Srebrenica is meant to be remembered in one way only, in accordance with one narrative, which does not include memories and experiences of the Serb population. This is what I find so paradoxical about the memory work in Bosnia.

## Appendix

### List of interviewees

The list below does not include surnames of the women interviewed for this research in order to protect their privacy. They are listed in the order in which interviews were conducted.

**Milanka**, woman in her fifties. Employed at a local organisation dedicated to documentation of Serb war victims. She spent the war partly in Sarajevo and in Bratunac (the Serb held town close to Srebrenica). Moved to Srebrenica in 2001. She was wounded during the war.

**Gordana**, 55. Used to work at one of the local factories before the war, now she is unemployed. She is from Srebrenica and left the town to come back after the war. Her husband and mother in law were killed in Srebrenica. She will testify about it at the ICTY.

**Mirsada**, in her early thirties. Librarian at the local library. Originally from Krajina (Serb part of Croatia). Spent the war in Belgrade where she married a man from Srebrenica. They both moved to Srebrenica after the war.

**Milica**, in her late forties. Librarian at the local library. She was born and raised in Srebrenica, left at the beginning of war for Serbia but came back to Bratunac. Moved back to Srebrenica in 1995. her husband was in the RS Army.

**Ivanka**, 56. Left Srebrenica at the beginning of the war, until 2008 lived in Serbia. Former member of the Communist party. Mother of two, divorced.

**Jela**, in her fifties. Before the war used to live in the outskirts of Srebrenica, now lives in a flat in the centre. Her husband was killed at the beginning of the war, his body has not been yet found. Several members of her extended family were killed. She left with two little children at the beginning of the war, first to Serbia, then back to Bratunac. She worked at a plant before the war, currently unemployed.

**Jovana**, 21. Shop assistant and mother of a two-year old. Left Srebrenica as a young child with her mother and sister after her father had been killed. Spent war time first in Serbia, then in Bratunac.

**Snjezana**, 24. Hairdresser. Married to a man from a mixed marriage (Serb-Muslim). Spent war in Serbia, came back to Srebrenica in 1998.

**Radojka**, 45. Works for an association of killed and missing Serbs. Lost husband and sister in the war. Comes from a village close to Srebrenica which was twice brutally attacked by the Muslim forces during the war. Her daughter studies in Serbia.

**Cvijeta**, 50. Half blind, professional physiotherapist. Finished primary school in Sarajevo and high school in Belgrade. Before the war, she was working in Srebrenica at the health resort, currently

unemployed. Lives with her husband and disabled mother.

**Biljana**, 27. Born in Sarajevo, lived in a town nearby the capital before the war. She spent the war first in Serbia, then in different towns in eastern Bosnia with her mother and younger sister. Several of members of her extended family were killed. Her parents decided to move to Srebrenica in 1996. Works for an international organisation.

**Mikica**, 29. Works for a local youth organisation. Spent war in Belgrade, with her mother and brother while her father was in the RS army.

**Danica**, 59. Lived in Srebrenica before the war where she worked as a clerk at the court. She left for Serbia with two young children at the beginning of the war and stayed in Belgrade until 1996, while her husband was in the RS army. She returned to her work at the court and lives with her two children.

**Gorka**, 54. Originally from Srebrenica but before the war lived close to Sarajevo. Her husband was in the RS army fighting close to Srebrenica. She and her two little daughters spent the war partly in Serbia, and in eastern Bosnia. She moved to Srebrenica in 1996. Her husband died in 2001, she works at her home fruit plantation in the outskirts of Srebrenica.

**Jasmina**, 59. Originally from Srebrenica, left for the time of war with her two little children. Her husband and mother in law stayed in town and were killed in their apartment. Their bodies have not yet been found. She works at the Municipality Office.

**Dragica**, in early fifties. Originally from Srebrenica, spent the war in Bratunac and came back in 1996. lost husband, two brothers and other members of the family. Bodies of her brothers have not been found yet. Her house in the outskirts of Srebrenica was burnt so now she lives in an apartment in the centre of the town. Unemployed.

**Dragana**, 35. Works for a local non-governmental organisation. Originally from Sarajevo, spent war in Serbia. Moved to Srebrenica due to work, married to a man from Bratunac. Mother of a six year old boy.

## Bibliography

Ashplant T. G., Graham Dawson & Michael Roper (eds) 2000, *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, Routledge, London.

Bloch, Maurice 1998, 'Autobiographical Memory and the Historical Memory of the More Distant Past', in *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy*, Westview, Boulder.

Brockmeier, Jens 2002, 'Remembering and Forgetting: Narrative as Cultural Memory', *Culture and Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 15-43.

Brubaker, Rogers 2004, *Ethnicity without Groups*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Bulatovic 1998, *Srpske žrtve opštine Srebrenica 1992-1995*. Centar za istraživanje zločina nad srpskim narodom Beograd.

Burke, P. 1989, 'History as Social Memory', in T. Butler (ed.), *Memory, History, Culture and the Mind*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, New York.

Colovic, Ivan 2002, *Politics of Identity in Serbia. Essays in Political Anthropology*. New York University Press, New York.

Connerton, Paul 1989, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Duijzings, Ger 2007, 'Commemorating Srebrenica' in Bougarel, Xavier, Elissa Helmes & Ger Duijzings (eds) 2007, *The New Bosnian Mosaic. Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-War Society*, Ashgate, Burlington.

Esbenshade, Richard S. 1995, 'Remembering to Forget: Memory, History, National Identity in Postwar East-Central Europe'. *Representations* 49, Winter 1995

Eyerman, Ron, June 2004, 'The Past in the Present. Culture and the Transmission of Memory', *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 159-169.

Fondacija Heinrich Boell 2005, *Srebrenica. Sjecanje za buducnost*. Fondacija Heinrich Boell, Sarajevo.

Foxen, P. 2000, 'Cacophony of Voices: A K'iche' Mayan Narrative of Remembrance and Forgetting', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 355-381.

Franovic, Ivana Dealing with the Past in the Context of Ethnonationalism. The Case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia. Berghof Occasional Paper Nr 29. Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management .

Fritzsche, Peter, March 2001, 'The Case of Modern Memory', *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 73, no. 1, pp. 87-117.

- Gillis, John R. 1994, *Commemorations. The Politics of National Identity*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Halbwachs, Maurice 1992, *On Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London.
- Hayden, Robert M. 1994, 'Recounting the Dead. The Rediscovery and Redefinition of War Time Massacres in Late- and Post-Communist Yugoslavia', in Rubie S. Watson (ed.), *Memory, History and Opposition under State Socialism*, University of Washington Press, Santa Fe.
- Hobsbawm, Eric & Terence Ranger (eds) 1992, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Hodgkin, Kathrine & Susannah Radstone (eds) 2006, *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick.
- International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia, 2004 *Judgement in the case Prosecutor vs. Krstic*, viewed 29 May, 2009 <http://www.un.org/icty/krstic/Appeal/judgement/index.htm>
- International Court of Justice, February 2007, *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro) Summary of the Judgment of 26 February 2007*, Viewed 29 May, 2009 <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/91/13687.pdf>
- Jansen, Stef 2002, 'The Violence of Memories. Local Narratives of the Past after Ethnic Cleansing in Croatia', *Rethinking History*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 77–94.
- Kansteiner, Wolf 2002, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies', *History and Theory*, vol. 41, 179-197.
- Kapralski, Slawomir, Spring/Summer 2006, 'The Jedwabne Village Green?: The Memory and Counter-Memory of the Crime', *History & Memory*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 179-194.
- Kirmayer, Laurence J. 1996, 'Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation', in M. Lambek & P. Antze (eds), *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, Routledge, London.
- Kolsto, Pal (ed.) 2005, *Myths and Boundaries in South Eastern Europe*, Hurst, London.
- Krilic Samir 2004, 'Bosnian Serbs Admit to Massacre', *The Washington Post*, 12 June, viewed 29 May, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35992-2004Jun11.html>
- Leydesdorff, Selma 2008, *Prazninu ostaviti iza nas*, Rabic, Sarajevo.
- Neisser, U. 1994, 'Self-narratives: True and False', in U. Neisser and R. Fivush (eds), *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-narrative*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- NIOD (The Netherlands Institute for War Documentation) 2002, *Srebrenica - a 'safe' area. Reconstruction, background, consequences and analyses of the fall of a Safe Area*, Viewed on 29 May 2009 <http://srebrenica.brightside.nl/srebrenica/>

Nora, Pierre, Spring 1989, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, no. 26, pp. 7-24.

Olick, Jeffrey K. 2007, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*, Routledge, New York.

Páez, D., J. Marques, J. Valencia & O. Vincze, 'Dealing with Collective Shame and Guilt', *Psicología Política*, no. 32, pp. 59-78.

Polandt-McCormick, Helena 2000, "'I Saw a Nightmare...' Violence and the Construction of Memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976)", *History and Theory*, no. 39, pp. 23-44.

Popov, Nebojsa (ed.) 2000, *The Road to War in Serbia. Trauma and Catharsis*, CEU Press, Budapest.

Radstone, Susannah (ed.) 2000, *Memory and Methodology*, Berg, Oxford, New York.

Renan, Ernest 1999, 'What is a Nation?' in Dahbour, and Ishay (eds.) *The Nationalism Reader*, Humanity Books, New York

Research and Documentation Centre 2007, *Annual Report 2008*, Research and Documentation Centre, Sarajevo.

Said, Edward W., Winter 2000, 'Invention, Memory, and Place', *Critical Inquiry* vol. 26, no. 2. pp. 175-192.

Smith, Anthony D. 1999, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Ugresic, Dubravka 2006, *Kultura klamstwa*. Wydawnictwo, Czarne.

UNHCR Representation to Bosnia-Herzegovina, June 2006, *Briefing Note: Return to Srebrenica*. Viewed 29 May, 2009, <http://www.unhcr.ba/updatemay07/srebrenica.pdf>

Wagner, Sarah 2008, *To Know Where He Lies: DNA Technology and the Search for Srebrenica's Missing*, University of California Press.

Wolentarska-Ochman, Ewa, Spring/Summer 2006 'Collective Remembrance in Jedwabne: Unsettled Memory of World War II in Postcommunist Poland', *History & Memory*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 152-178.

Women in Black Network 2006, *Women's Side of War [Zenska strana rata]*, Women in Black, Belgrade.



## Endnotes

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Office of the High Representative (OHR) is an *ad hoc* international institution responsible for overseeing implementation of civilian aspects of the accord ending the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- <sup>ii</sup> Employees of the Memorial Centre admit that there is one person who did was not directly killed in the genocide but was buried in Potocari. That is a doctor who died in a helicopter crash when going to provide medical help to the Muslim victims. He was first buried in Srebrenica but later, on the request on his wife, re-buried at the Memorial Centre. The curator of the Memorial Centre strongly opposes any claims that list of victims of genocide includes people killed before July 1995 or those who are alive. This was challenged informally by local journalist as well as a representative of a Sarajevo based nongovernmental organisation, who said that it is very likely that there are bodies of some people killed before July 1995.
- <sup>iii</sup> In 2006, he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment by the ICTY for failing to prevent the deaths of five and the mistreatment of eleven Bosnian Serbs during the period from late 1992 to early 1993 on the basis of superior criminal responsibility. He was acquitted on the other charges of wanton destruction and causing damage to civilian infrastructure beyond the realm of military necessity. In 2008 the Appeals Chamber of the ICTY reversed the Trial Chamber's conviction and acquitted Orić of all charges brought against him.
- <sup>iv</sup> This is even more complicated in places where system of 'one roof-two schools' is implemented. In such places, children belonging to two different national groups have classes in the same school building but entirely separated. Either they have shifts or building is divided into two parts and children not only do not learn with their peers of different nationality but do not interact with them at all. For more about this phenomenon see: [http://www.oscebih.org/public/print\\_news.asp?id=969](http://www.oscebih.org/public/print_news.asp?id=969)