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10 Years On, Tormenting Memories of Srebrenica

By DAVID ROHDE

SREBRENICA, Bosnia and Herzegovina, July 9 - A decade ago here in eastern Bosnia, Camila Omanovic tied a rope around an iron pipe in an abandoned factory. She asked God to forgive her and tried to hang herself.

Days earlier, Bosnian Serb soldiers had overwhelmed 370 poorly armed Dutch peacekeepers protecting Srebrenica, a pocket of 40,000 Bosnian Muslims that had been declared a "safe area" under United Nations protection. In the final and most brutal chapter of four years of ethnic war - and the worst massacre in Europe since World War II - the Serbian forces rounded up and killed more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys. Ms. Omanovic's husband was among them.

Convinced that she faced rape, torture and death, Ms. Omanovic decided on suicide. But two teenage boys saw her, called for help, and peacekeepers came and pulled her to the ground.

With as many as 50,000 people expected to gather here on Monday to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the killings - which war crimes judges ruled genocide - and the forced expulsions of more than 30,000 Muslim women and children, three lives reflect how Srebrenica has changed, and how the effects of its horror live on.

A Bosnian Serb who arrived in Srebrenica the day after the town fell and helped save two Srebrenica Muslims has sunk into a life shadowed by an anemic economy, criminal mafias and a stubborn denial of the scope of the slaughter here. A Dutch soldier still serves his unit but remains haunted by Srebrenica. Ms. Omanovic and 2,900 other Muslims have returned to the town, intent on reversing the Serbian goal of creating an "ethnically pure" Serbian state in Bosnia. "No one said we would ever be able to come back," said Ms. Omanovic, her face flushed with pride. "I'm not afraid."

The Pull of a Husband's Grave

Today, Ms. Omanovic is a woman transformed.

A shaken and fragile figure when interviewed just after the town's fall a decade ago, she was assertive and animated on a recent Friday night as she sat in her brother's new Srebrenica guesthouse. She laughed, waved her hands in the air and shook her head in disbelief as she explained how she found the courage to journey home.

"Everyone is afraid to come back because everyone has bad memories," she said, surrounded by old Muslim friends. "I thought I would never return."

Her homecoming is part of a \$21 million American, European and Canadian effort to move Muslims back to the Srebrenica area and rebuild the town. Progress has been slow, and some Srebrenica survivors accuse the United States and Europe of making a tepid effort. Muslims are returning, they say, because they are impoverished and have nowhere else to go. The two Serbian leaders indicted on charges of genocide in the killings, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, remain free.

For Ms. Omanovic, every Muslim who returns here is a victory. The area's population is now 40 percent Muslim. The town's mayor is a Muslim. Forty percent of its police force is Muslim. Forty Muslim children attend high school with 600 Serbs.

Ms. Omanovic works as a bookkeeper in the same factory where she tried to kill herself. Now it holds the administrative offices of the sprawling local memorial to Srebrenica's dead. One of the teenage boys who helped save her is a town policeman; the other is a guard at the memorial. After being expelled from Srebrenica, Ms. Omanovic lived in Muslim-controlled central Bosnia. Last year, she was offered the bookkeeping job at the memorial. She could not sleep for three nights. Visions of the war, as well as an unexpected longing for Srebrenica, filled her. Something else also drew her back: her husband's grave.

DNA tests have identified the remains of 2,070 Muslims found in forests and mass graves. Searchers discovered the body of Ms. Omanovic's husband, an engineer she calls "my beloved Ahmet," at an ambush site. His head and one of his hands were missing.

"It's the contentment of the soul," she said. "I feel close to him. I go to the grave."

Ms. Omanovic lives on a street of mostly abandoned houses. Her neighbors are eight other Muslim widows.

Ignoring rumors that the town is haunted, the women have restarted a competition from before the war that honors Srebrenica's most beautiful garden. Amid the abandoned houses of the dead, pockets of carefully nurtured red roses, white lilies and yellow carnations bloom.

"I would like this town to be like it used to be," Ms. Omanovic said.

When she met her husband's former assistant, a Serbian woman, they embraced. The Serb trembled and wept. In line at the local bank, Serbs wave Ms. Omanovic to the front.

But she and other residents say the town's Muslims and Serbs inhabit parallel worlds. They rarely socialize. Both sides, they say, hide their true emotions.

"They are very polite, they kiss me," she said. "After everything that happened, I know it's just acting."

Muslims' Savior Is Bitter

About a mile north of the Omanovic family's new guesthouse is the home of a former Serbian

soldier who grew up in Srebrenica. The former soldier, a middle-aged man, asked to speak on condition of anonymity because he feared retaliation if Serbian nationalists learned that he saved two Muslims after the town's fall.

At the time of the massacre, he was an army soldier who was ordered to separate a group of mostly elderly Muslim men from a crowd of refugees and load them onto a truck, he said. He spotted two elderly Muslim men who had treated him kindly as a youth: the longtime maître d'hôtel of the local hotel restaurant and his favorite high-school teacher.

Defying a Serb who outranked him, he told the two they could stay with the women.

In a separate interview, the Muslim teacher confirmed that the man had saved his life and that of the hotel worker.

Today the former soldier is more bitter and less confident. He complained that Muslims have more jobs in the town's government, police force and factories.

Like other local Serbs, he begrudges the changes in Srebrenica and minimizes the massacre, and Serbian responsibility for it. He dismisses the vast amounts of forensic evidence and two confessions from Serbian military officers in war crimes trials, and questions the number of dead.

"Islam is financing all that," he said.

In interviews a decade ago, he expressed confidence that Bosnia's Serbs would have a separate country. But while the Muslims have returned to Srebrenica, the Serbian population has dwindled to 4,000, just a third of what it was after the war. He said the international community was forcing Serbs to live with Muslims. "We all are aware what is imposed," he said. "We are not that stupid. We understand."

He says peacekeepers will have to stay in Bosnia until a strong economy eases tensions.

But he is cynical, too, about Serbian nationalists. At one point after the war, he was shot when he tried to break up a fight involving a Serb. Western diplomats have said the Serb is a member of one of the Serb nationalist mafias flourishing in the country.

The former soldier predicted that the man would never be punished.

"We were fighting for a system," he said, meaning a well-governed Serbian state. "This is what we get."

Dutch Soldier Can't Forget

Eight hundred miles northwest of Srebrenica, in the Netherlands, Sgt. First Class Theo Lutke, 34, thinks about the fall of the town "almost every day."

"I think I have a rucksack of experiences," he said. "This experience will always stay in the backpack."

He and other Dutch peacekeepers tried to serve as unarmed escorts for the busloads of Muslim women and children expelled from the area. But Serbian soldiers stole their blue United Nations helmets and flak jackets at gunpoint and used them to trick Muslims into surrendering. One Dutch peacekeeper was forced to climb onto a stolen United Nations vehicle, was given a rifle and taken "Muslim hunting" by the Serbs. No Muslims were found.

"I didn't know if I would come home ever," said Sergeant Lutke, who is one of a few dozen Srebrenica veterans still in the Dutch Army.

After the scale of the massacre emerged, Srebrenica became a national scandal in the Netherlands. An exhaustive investigation forced the resignation of the country's prime minister in 2002. The commander of the Dutch battalion said he moved to Spain because people in the Netherlands shouted "coward" at him on the street.

Sergeant Lutke went through his own soul-searching. "I looked in the mirror and asked myself, 'Did I do everything I could?'" He believes he did. He blames Serbian nationalists.

The Dutch government has continued deploying peacekeepers, sending troops to Macedonia, Albania, Ethiopia, Liberia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

In June 2004, the Dutch unit that served in Srebrenica was sent to southern Iraq. Four Apache attack helicopters backed the unit, firepower that Dutch military officials say could have slowed or stopped the Serbian advance on Srebrenica. A Srebrenica veteran commanded; Sergeant Lutkeled a squad.

"You feel like a soldier again," he said. Yet after his patrol killed two suspected suicide bombers, flashbacks of Srebrenica filled his mind. He returned home early.

"It exploded inside me," he said, referring to the reawakened memories. "I wanted to sleep. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't."

Nicholas Wood contributed reporting from Bosnia for this article.

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