

Gintare Survilaite
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8,372 Will Not Be Forgotten

Thanks to efforts to educate and inform people of all ages, most of us know (or think we know) about genocide. Most people know about the Holocaust, fewer know about Rwanda, and a small smattering know any more than that. We like to think that we've explored the topic and talked sufficiently about the never-ending question: "what can we learn from this?" The truth is, we as a people have not learned much. Most genocides are almost never talked about or remembered except by the victims. Most people don't consider it important enough to waste their precious time contemplating. After all, why focus on such a heavy and depressing topic when we can just forget about it and move on? Time heals all wounds, right? The problem is, when we forget about the millions of people who were killed because of who they were, not only are we silencing and utterly disrespecting them, we open the door to allow more of these atrocities to happen. It is a vicious cycle, one that always ends with pain and death, and those of us who feel adequately removed from the situation enable and continuously spin this circle round and round. We cannot keep this up, because sooner or later it will transform us, our very humanity, into something ugly and self-serving. It will chip away at us until we accept the unacceptable.

The Srebrenica genocide began as all genocides do, with a conflict between two different peoples. Bosnian Serbs believed they were superior over Muslim Bosnians and sought to achieve "ethnic cleansing" by systematically murdering Muslim men and raping Muslim women and teenage girls. Although the UN had already established a safe zone around Srebrenica by 1993, it only lasted until July, 1995, when the Serbs took over a UN Observation Post and officially began the genocide ("What Happened in Srebrenica."). Over the course of a month, 8,372 men

were slaughtered in Srebrenica, and many more women were raped (“What Happened in Srebrenica.”). 8,372 is a hard number to visualize, it seems almost small and insignificant compared to, say, the millions who died in the Holocaust. 8,372 dead in one month roughly equates to 280 dead per day. Two hundred and eighty men, brothers, fathers, and sons were slaughtered every day because of their religion. That might not be as many as the Holocaust, but who cares? These were people, just like us, who were forced to endure hardships nobody should ever have to go through. This isn’t about “them”, because we can’t distance ourselves from them anymore. This is about us.

Fatima was one of many women who were beaten, tortured, raped, and abused during the Srebrenica genocide. She lost nearly everything- her dignity, her self-worth, her house, her family (“Breaking the Silence”). The Serbian army destroyed everything she had once been proud of and left her broken and alone to deal with the aftermath. Many were not this fortunate. Many other women went through the same and then died not knowing the fates of their family. Although Fatima’s story might be better than some, her experiences are horrific, unthinkable.

The fact that this even happened in the first place- a 14 year old teenage girl was *raped* and *tortured*- words cannot describe how absolutely vile, how disgusting and despicable the people and actions that allowed this to happen are (“Breaking the Silence”). After she was raped, they argued right in front of her about whether to kill her or not, and she “cannot describe what it [is] like to watch two men fight over whether they are going to kill you or not” (“Breaking the Silence”). A fourteen year old girl should have been able to leave her home without constant vigilance, without that feeling of terror every time she saw a shadow move. She should have been able to hang out with friend, focus on her schoolwork, and have a fun night out now and again. Instead, she was forced to witness the pure horror of war and genocide (“Breaking the

Silence”). She was forced to grow up much faster than she should have. She deserved to be a teen for just a little longer.

Mirsada has, unfortunately, a very similar story to Fatima. She was only 15 years old, searching for food in the village with her family, when her very neighbors captured them (“The Courage to Survive”). As if to make it easier on himself, her neighbor acted as if he didn’t know them (“The Courage to Survive”). He used the same type of disassociation and removed himself from the situation much the same way as we as a species are; we are all searching for the best way to deny responsibility or the necessity of acknowledging these atrocities in order to seem like better people; we choose to ignore these horrors because then they will not affect us, they will not hurt us. Mirsada was then separated from her family and sent- along with three other girls- to be raped repeatedly throughout the night (“The Courage to Survive”). She was eventually rescued, but she “will carry that burden of pain all [her] life. The past will always be with [her]” (“The Courage to Survive”). She will never be able to forget the days where she was scared for her life, or the nights where she was used like a toy for soldiers’ pleasure. Although she has much in common with Fatima, Mirsada was taken by someone she knew, someone she probably trusted, and betrayed. She will likely have severe trust issues for the rest of her life. Unlike Fatima, Mirsada did not personally see much of the war. This does not make her story less tragic, for she still had no idea where her family was, if they were safe, or if she would survive her own ordeal. Both Mirsada and Fatima are courageous women who survived terrible ordeals and have endured much to tell us their stories.

The truth is, nobody wants to believe that there are people capable of this. Nobody wants to believe that this could happen to anybody, even themselves. Nobody wants to believe that their neighbor, their friends, even their family could turn against them. Nobody wants to believe

that they could be a part of it. Nobody wants to believe they could be a bad person. Nobody wants to believe that they could torture, kill, and imprison their friends, neighbor, and family. Nobody wants to believe they could be a bad person. Until we accept that we are one species, that we all have this capability, we will never give genocide the attention it needs in order to never occur again. We have a system in place, and we think it is perfect. It is not. Srebrenica is proof of that- “even with NATO troops on the ground, a horrible genocide occurred, resulting in the brutal deaths of more than eight thousand citizens” (Haerens). As long as we live in blissful ignorance, we will never be able to change the world for the better. Remembering genocides will not stop them from happening again. We need to come together, no matter what race, religion, or beliefs define us. We need to celebrate our differences, not eliminate them. We need to respect and love every part of each other. We need to accept that the world will never be perfect. We need to remember and learn from our mistakes.

Works Cited

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