

# Recovery from genocide through tourism: Srebrenica City of Hope Project

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## ABSTRACT

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This manuscript is about how to recover from genocide through tourism. The focus is on Srebrenica, where genocide was committed by Serbs-Bosnian troops in July 1995. Tourism is a form of dealing with the genocide That is what *Srebrenica City of Hope* project does, fostering remembrance into the future, developing sustainable tourism, and strengthening the region economically. Focus is on community development, as well as natural and cultural heritage protection. In order to host visitors, 12 wooden houses were rebuilt according to traditional architecture. Tourists have the opportunity to stay overnight with host families, take part in guided excursions, enter in touch with the traditional soul of Bosnia, all of this while a new source of income opens up for the locals. The core of the project is the *Srebrenica Memorial Centre and Cemetery* in Potočari, whose aim is to preserve the memory of the genocide and fight against denial on the path of transitional justice and peace-building. *Srebrenica City of Hope* promotes tolerance, dialogue, and collective healing and moves forward by creating a network of people working together to cope with distressing memories. To this day, more than 2,600 persons joined the project, collecting visitors from five European countries.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This manuscript talks about how to recover from genocide and how such a devastating event can be overcome through memory, solidarity and cultural tourism. The focus is on Srebrenica, where genocide, according to the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY)<sup>1</sup> was perpetrated by Bosnian Serb troops against the Bosnian male population in July 1995, as part of the wars related to the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.icty.org/en/cases/judgement-list>

## 2. THE EVENTS

Srebrenica, the ancient Argentaria, is located in a valley in the mountains in eastern Bosnia, near the Serbia's border, still within Republika Srpska. Its name is now indelibly associated with the massacre that the *International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia* (ICTY) condemned as genocide. It is the first time that a Criminal Tribunal issued a sentence of conviction for genocide since the 1948 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (Jones, 2004).

The pre-war municipality of Srebrenica had a population of 37,000, 75% Bosnian Muslims and 25% Bosnian Serbs. Today, only around 15,000 remain in the town. As a consequence of the war, the ethnic composition of the town has changed. Although Muslims made up the most of the population, army and police formations of the Republika Srpska (BSA), supported by Serbian forces together with mercenaries, managed to take control of the town as early as mid-April '92. During this period, the Bosnians were not expelled from their homes, but still subjected to serious abuses. The Srebrenica enclave reached its maximum extension, 900 km<sup>2</sup>, in January '93, joining the enclave of Cerska, nearby to the west.

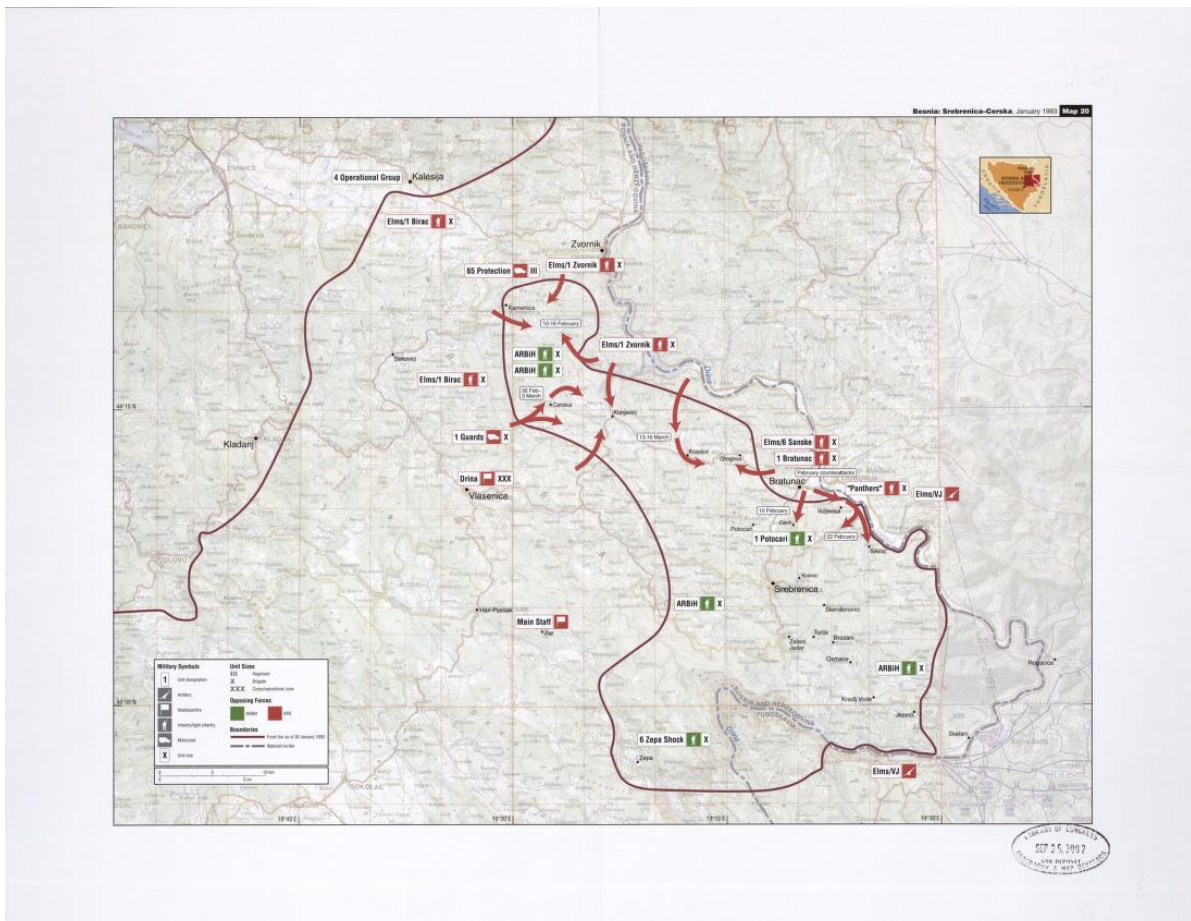


Image 1. United States Central Intelligence Agency. Office Of Russian and European Analysis. Balkan Battlegrounds. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Russian and European Analysis, to 2003, 1991. Map <sup>2</sup>. Source: Library of the Congress.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010588135/>

Despite its expansion, it fails to get together with the territory under the rule of the Bosnian Republic (ARBiH), further west, becoming isolated and vulnerable to Serb attacks. Indeed, starting in March, Serb forces advanced rapidly, burning and killing. The city, surrounded and overpopulated due to the arrival of refugees, remains for months in the crosshairs of the snipers, under a hail of shells, short of water and lacking medical assistance, food, salt and without the most basic sanitary measures (Suljagić, 2022).

## 2.1 The fall of Srebrenica

Despite the dispatch of humanitarian aid by UNHCR and over a hundred UN Resolutions - including 820<sup>3</sup> imposing a cease-fire and mandating the Blue Helmets to "prevent the Serbs from conquering Srebrenica and proceed to demilitarization" - the town remains locked in the grip of the Serbs for about three years in an escalation of violence, until 6<sup>th</sup> July 1995, when, it is conquered in three days (Ryngaert & Schrijver, 2015). The "incompetent" Dutch Blue Helmets (Beigbeder, 2006), having surrendered their weapons, take refuge in the base of Potočari, under the threats of Ratko Mladić (Masten, 2002). 20-25,000 civilians follow them hoping to find refuge there under the UN flag (Caplan, 1996); but only 4-5,000 of them are allowed to enter, while the rest bivouac nearby (Rastello, 2020).

On 7<sup>th</sup> July, Mladić, given assurances that women, old people and children would be evacuated from Potočari, makes all the men between 17 and 60 identified, and within three days they are loaded onto 40-50 vehicles, while the Dutch contingent, fearful or unaware, however guilty<sup>4</sup>, give them to the executioners (Naimark, 2011). For five days, the men are slaughtered and then buried in primary mass graves and later dismembered and placed in secondary ones trying to conceal the massacre (Rohde, 1997). Transports from Potočari continue until the 12<sup>th</sup> of July. Women, children and invalids are beaten, insulted and crammed into buses with initial destination Kladanj and Tišća. From there, they are forced to walk about 7 km from the front line to the territory under Bosnian rule (Dikić, 2020). The men are driven to the area of Bratunac. There, without water, food and sanitation, they are stripped of their belongings and identity documents, which are then burned.

The same thing happens at the football field near Nova Kasaba. By the end of 12<sup>th</sup> July, about 12,000 civilians have been evacuated, one day later the number grew to 20,000. Many men are killed immediately near Potočari, Sandići and along the road to Bratunac. The approximately 6,000 prisoners in Bratunac are imprisoned in a number of improvised places such as the classrooms of the Vuk Karadžić primary schools, the abandoned building of the former Duro Pucar Stari school, the football field and even some buses and trucks parked on the city streets<sup>5</sup>. About 1,200 are imprisoned in the Nikola Tesla primary school in Kula, more than 1,000 in the warehouse of the Kravica agricultural cooperative, about 12 km from Bratunac. In that warehouse on the 13<sup>th</sup> July afternoon, most of the prisoners are killed. On the same day, at least 1,500 men are killed between Kravica, the Cerska valley,

<sup>3</sup> <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/165323>

<sup>4</sup> <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/#!/details?id=ECLI:NL:HR:2019:1284>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.icty.org/x/cases/nikolic/tjug/en/mnik-sj031202-e.pdf>

along the bank of the Jadar River, in Nova Kasaba, in Sandići and near the Vuk Karadžić school.

In the meantime, some hundred prisoners are taken to Zvornik, 45 kilometres away 300-400 of them are placed during the night between 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> July in the gymnasium in Grbavci from where, in the early afternoon of the 14<sup>th</sup> July, they transported less than 1 kilometre away to Orahovac, where the pit was dug. There all the prisoners are shot. By the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1,500 to 2,500 men are shot<sup>6</sup>. On the 14<sup>th</sup> July, more prisoners are taken to the school in Ročević, where more than 1,000 men are imprisoned until Saturday the 15<sup>th</sup> July. Some of them are shot *in situ*, and at least another 1,000 in Kozluk, on the banks of Drina River, at a local rubbish dump and gravel quarry where the bodies are hidden in mass graves. Another 500 men are taken to the school and House of Culture in Pilica and to Petkovci. The execution place used on 15<sup>th</sup> July is the dam a few minutes' drive from Petkovci where 800 to 1,000 men are killed by firing squad<sup>7</sup>. On the night between 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> July, only the prisoners held in the school in Kula and in the culture house in Pilica remained to be killed. That is about 2,000 men. On Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> July, the prisoners are taken out and driven to the "Branjevo military estate". From 10 a.m. until 4 p.m., in groups of ten, they are taken off the buses and placed face to face with the executioners and shot.

In summary, during five days, more than 8,000 men are slaughtered. The mass killings began on 13<sup>th</sup> July in the Bratunac area (at least 1,000 men killed) and continued between 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> July 1995 in the Zvornik area in Orahovac (between 800 and 2,500 killed), in Petkovci (over 800 killed), in Kozluk (over 1,000 killed), in Pilica and on the Branjevo farm (between 1,000 and 2,000 killed).

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<sup>6</sup>[https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a\\_549\\_1999.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_549_1999.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/bosnia1095web.pdf>



Image 2. Execution and mass grave sites. Source: Wagner, S., & Nettelfield L. (2014). *Srebrenica in the Aftermath of Genocide*. Cambridge University Press. Source: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/srebrenica-in-the-aftermath-of-genocide/introduction/490AAC46175A17FDF143BB56C3B90D14>

## 2.2. The death march

Upon the fall of Srebrenica, the approximately 15,000 civilians who did not seek refuge at the UN base, mostly able-bodied men, with some old men, women and children, decide to attempt to flee on foot to Tuzla, some 100 kilometres away through the woods. Gathered between Jaglić and Šušnjari, they begin to move from the enclave into the surrounding Serbian territory shortly after 11<sup>th</sup> July midnight. Armed men placed themselves at the head of the column and communicated with those at the end of it via portable radios. The route out of the enclave is initially slow: the men must pass single file through the Serbian minefields. The last people left Šušnjari and Jaglici messily in the early afternoon of 12<sup>th</sup> July. The first planned stopping point is a hill overlooking the village of Kamenica, about 6 kilometres away. Here, the first group arrives early in the morning of 12<sup>th</sup> July and remains in the area until sunset. Although the escape is slow, the BSA troops do not attack immediately, but just before the sunrise. They locate sections of the departing column and begin to attack them, while Bosnians are still in the *safe area*. They use bombs, grenades, rifles, mortars, anti-aircraft guns and artillery, from positions on Mount Rogac and from other hills above Kravici.

The attacks are lethally accurate whenever the column has to cross open ground. In the afternoon, the first ambush takes place near Kamenico Brdo: people scatter, many men remain in the area for several days, unable to move, the column is cut in two. Some of those who manage to escape set off towards Zepa, another *safe area*, which, however, falls into the hands of the BSA troops on the 25<sup>th</sup> July. Many of those who continue towards Tuzla are gripped by terror and lose control, some of them decide to surrender but are liquidated *in situ* by the BSA troops, others even commit suicide. The column tries to collect and transport as many wounded people as possible but soon falls apart due to the fatigue of the forced marches and frequent ambushes. The front section proceeds at about 6 p.m. towards Burnice on the main asphalt road between Kasaba and Konjevici Polje. At about 11 p. m. the fugitives reach Mount Udrč fording Jadar river. During the night, BSA soldiers, wearing civilian clothes, try to infiltrate the column, spreading disinformation and confusion. Then they kill as many people as possible. Early in the morning of Thursday 13<sup>th</sup>, the column is also attacked by chemical bullets. During the next three days, it moves further and further north, mostly at night and, if it is possible, hidden by the forest. Groups of rearguards begin to surrender to the BSA, in two main areas: in the Sandici meadow and near Nova Kasaba football field. A huge number of them are taken to Bratunac. On the 16<sup>th</sup> they are loaded onto buses and trucks and killed in the Cerska Valley.

150 bodies with their hands tied are found in a mass grave near this location. Several hundred, however, are piled up in an agricultural warehouse in Kravica and killed by small arms fire and grenades. Between 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>, the remain of the column continue toward Tuzla. In the late evening of the 16<sup>th</sup> and in the early morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>, about 4,500-6,000 of the approximately 15,000 who had set out, arrived in ARBiH-controlled territory. The vast majority did not survive due to fear, fatigue, narrowed state of consciousness, lack of knowledge of the terrain, lack of food, water and weapons, shelling by BSA artillery, which also made use of hallucinogenic gases (Hay, 1998), ambushes. Many of them are exterminated after capture or surrender to Mladić's troops (Dikić, 2020). On the 18<sup>th</sup>, survivors begin to arrive in the Tuzla area, searching for their families. The Bosnian government transports them to collective shelters in the Tuzla area. ICTY was able to determine that approximately 3,000 of the escapees were killed fighting against BSA troops or crossing of mines and an unknown number of men are killed between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> July and are buried within 24-48 hours in mass graves in the immediate vicinity of the execution sites. In some cases, the victims are forced to dig their own pits; in other cases, they are shot while inside them. In the following months, the corpses are exhumed from the initial mass graves and reburied in 33 different "secondary sites" to conceal the genocide. Between 4,000 and 7,500 people in the column remain unaccounted for a long time, and of almost 1,000 of them no remains have been found yet (Fink, 2015). 8,372 are the identified victims of the genocide (Honig & Both, 1996), but many human remains are still being identified and about 1,100 people are still missing (Brunborg, 2003).





Image 3. The Death March. (Remembering Srebrenica).

Source: <https://srebrenica.org.uk/what-happened/history/column>

### 3. MEMORY THROUGH TOURISM: SREBRENICA CITY OF HOPE PROJECT

Dark tourism or ‘thanatourism’ is a modern way of dealing with genocide (Owens, 2016). Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland is a brilliant example: in 2023, nearly 1.68 million people visited it<sup>8</sup>. The effect of international tourism on atrocity narratives has gained strength over recent decades as foreign visitors increasingly interact directly with the genocidal story through international tour groups, mission trips, study abroad programmes, eco-travel and academic conferences (Lischer, 2019). Dark tourism in war-related sites in Bosnia, such as Sarajevo (Kamber et al., 2016), Mostar and Srebrenica, is growing too, despite the many difficulties related to poverty, lack of infrastructure, hate speech against Bosnians, political hostility and prevailing denialism.

*Srebrenica City of Hope* project expresses concern about the commercialised marketing of dark tourism schemes and prefers to focus on Srebrenica daily life and to look to the future. The project also relies on the economic benefits of tourism, which continually replays past atrocities. *Srebrenica City of Hope*, born in 2017 in order to promote the memory of the genocide in the future, is a collaboration between the Italian group *Amici della Natura* (Friends of Nature) and Irvin Mujčić.

The Friends of Nature is a non-profit organisation with a background in the social democratic movement founded in Vienna in 1895, banned by the Nazis in 1933 but revived in 1945 and now spread across eight countries: Austria, Germany, Great Britain, France, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Holland and Italy. With 350,000 individual members organised in approximately 45 member organisations, the Friends of Nature are among the biggest non-profit and non-governmental organisations worldwide. The Friends of Nature is aimed

<sup>8</sup> [www.statista.com/statistics/1115176/attendance-auschwitz-birkenau-memorial](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1115176/attendance-auschwitz-birkenau-memorial)

to make the enjoyment of nature accessible to broader population strata and to the wider community, by providing appropriate recreational and travel facilities. It encourages sustainable tourism and international friendship.

Irvin Mujčić, the second of three children, was born in Srebrenica on the 5<sup>th</sup> December 1987 in a wealthy family, he is part of the generation of Bosnian boys and girls who had to leave their homeland in order to survive the 'ethnic cleansing' campaigns perpetuated by Bosnian Serb militias (Halilovich, 2015). Irvin, with his mother Nadja, older sister Elvira and younger brother Nermin, found a seat on one of the last buses leaving Srebrenica on the 16<sup>th</sup> April 1992, one day before the city was attacked by BSA troops. His father instead remained in Srebrenica working as an interpreter for the Blue Helmets. Nadja and her children lived for a few months in a Bosnian village with her paternal relatives, and then, as the war spread, escaped clandestinely to Croatia, where they spent a year crammed into a refugee camp. They then reached the Italian shores thanks to a refugee reception program. In Ancona, the family was received and taken to Cevo, in the province of Brescia. It was there, in the Adamello mountains, that Irvin spent around 20 years, obtaining Italian citizenship and forging lasting ties with the local population and the territory, but never forgetting Srebrenica. As an adult, Irvin chose to return to his hometown to change things: not only to look for traces of his missing father but to help his country plagued by a severe economic crisis and one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe. So, the young Brescian-Bosnian man made the reverse journey: a return to his country of origin to turn memory into hope.

### 3.1 Srebrenica City of Hope: the aim

The idea of *Srebrenica - City of Hope* was born in an attempt to revive the local economy and give the city a new face: no longer an open-air museum-cemetery, but a place of hope<sup>9</sup>.



Image 4. Srebrenica: city view. Source: <https://navicup.com/object/balkan-grand-tour/srebrenica-genocide-memorial-219273/gb>

<sup>9</sup> <https://srebrenicahope.wordpress.com/about/>



*“We did not choose Srebrenica, it came to us as a personal, family, accidental inheritance for having been born there and lived there until a certain point in our lives. Its wounded environment and torn social fabric are part of the experience of our existence and have shaped our way of looking at the world, forcing us to turn our gaze in new directions in search of methods of survival and salvation, in an attempt to unfreeze the past and get back on track. Over time, we also became convinced that this place on the edge could become a privileged vantage point for anyone who knows how to look”,* Irvin told me in an interview in July 2019.

The project is currently managed by the NGO *‘Prijatelji Prirode – Oaza Mira’*, a Bosnian member of International Friends of Nature. It is a democratically organised movement that is committed to ecological and sociopolitical causes. Also Austrian, German, Italian, Dutch, Bosnian groups associated with Friends of Nature support *Srebrenica city of Hope*. In addition, Bauorden, an international organization founded in Germany in 1953, based in Lugwigshafen, which organizes workcamps for young people all over Europe, has joined the project.

*Prijatelji Prirode - Oaza Mira* is engaged in the development of sustainable tourism in Srebrenica in order to strengthen the region economically. The focus of activities is on community development as well as the protection of natural and cultural heritage (Kono & Okahashi, 2023). The NGO sector in BiH is robust but is sometimes exposed to government pressure and interference, especially in Republika Srpska. Many organizations face a potential conflict if they seek to criticize the government. *Srebrenica city of Hope* has no state funding, because the town is located within Republika Srpska, where, on one hand, Serbian denialism prevails, which does not recognise the genocide and would like to destroy its memory, and, on the other hand, the Bosniak coming back home are not welcome.

*“Before the war, Srebrenica had 37,676 inhabitants, according to the 1991 census. Only 1,000 Bosniack came back in these almost 30 years, after the Dayton agreement. So, Serbian ethnic cleaning worked very well”,* Irvin told me during an interview in March 2024. Even though the war ended decades ago, the post-war struggle defines society. Today, Srebrenica remains a town struggling with the consequences of the genocidal war, and the way the conflict ended has significant overall effects on the stability of that area. Structural and ideological conditions that led to the 1990s genocide never ceased to exist. Genocide denial and threats of secession persist and are the source of a constant struggle between Bosniack and Serbs (Mulaj, 2017).

The project wants its town to be appreciated again for its natural beauty (forests, rivers, canyons) and its traditional, rural lifestyle, as well as for the memory of the genocide. The entire region has not yet recovered economically, so the project's activities can make an important contribution to giving people a new perspective. At the moment, 12 persons joined the project, all coming from Srebrenica Bosniack family, and they earn income from hosting visitors, cooking for them and guiding them in the excursions.

*“It is not a huge amount of money, but it is enough to survive. Srebrenica area has the lowest percentage of employment in Bosnia-Erzegovina. There are no more baths – Srebrenica was famous for thermal baths and Tito was used to go there on vacation- no more industries. Tourists are used to have just a daily “horror trip” from Sarajevo to Srebrenica, that takes only two hours and half. They do not stay overnight in our town, do not spend money here, so there is no income for the local population”, Irvin told me in March 2024. “We want to make Srebrenica alive again through long-stay tourism offering a new perspective that overcomes ‘dark tourism’, articulated in four parts: 1) genocide, 2) denial, 3) returnees, 4) nature.”*

Media in many European countries dedicated news pieces to *Srebrenica city of Hope*: almost every Bosnian TV channels, Rai national Italian channel<sup>10</sup>, RSI national Suisse TV<sup>11</sup>, Bosnian, Italian, French, Dutch and Polish Newspaper, and two Italian journalists, Francesco Battistini and Marzio G. Mian (2022), dedicated a chapter of their book, titled *Maledetta Sarajevo*, to Irvin’s project.

### **3.2. Srebrenica City of Hope: tourist facilities and attractions**

To host the visitors, the project built the *Ekometeta Village* born from the ashes of a completely destroyed village during wartime. *Ekometeta* is a made-up name consisting of three parts: 1) “eko”, that is “echo” a sound or sounds caused by the reflection of sound waves from a surface back to the listener, 2) “kometa”, that is “comet”, a celestial body that is seen on rare occasions from the earth as a bright line in the sky, 3) “meta”, that is “goal”, “destination”, because the rebirth of Srebrenica is the aim and desired result of the project.

*Ekometeta Village* is located 12 km from the city centre of Srebrenica in an isolated and completely natural wild valley, enclosed between the Jadar River and creek Kasapic, on the edge of Mount Kak. It consists of five main lodges, completely in wood. The place can only be reached by car or walking and there is no public transport reaching this area. The *Ekometeta Village* is a project trying to show how to use the natural materials around in a proper way, combining old construction techniques and current environmental good practices.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rai.it/ufficiostampa/assets/template/us-articolo.html?ssiPath=/articoli/2020/07/Radio3-ricorda-il-25anniversario-del-genocidio-di-Srebrenica-1995---2020-ee9b6423-f8a8-44ca-9010-53bbd07dc0d5-ssi.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.rsi.ch/info/oltre-la-news/Srebrenica-di-progetti-e-futuro-4--1207179.html>; Bosnian, German, Italian national radio (<https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Transeuropa/11-luglio-25-anni-dal-genocidio-di-Srebrenica>)



Image 5. Ekometa Village. Source: [https://www.facebook.com/srebrenicahope/?locale=it\\_IT](https://www.facebook.com/srebrenicahope/?locale=it_IT)

Tourists also have the opportunity to stay overnight with host families, to participate in guided hikes and excursions in small groups, to get in touch with the traditional soul of Bosnia and to connect with the local population - all while a new source of income opens up for the locals. Some examples of excursions include three different possible routes of varying difficulty and duration along the Drina canyon, which is one of the main natural attractions and the most recently established nature park in Bosnia. One is the *Black Creek* (duration 8 hours, medium difficulties): From *Ekometa Village* you can reach the mystic and panoramic view of the Black Creek, located in the middle of the Drina canyon, passing through the village of Kutuzero where you can visit Bosnian Necropolis of medieval time. Another excursion, called *White Waters*, lasts two days: on the first one, hiking for 4 hours from *Ekometa Village*, you can reach the black creek for sunset time where you will camp. It is a unique and magical experience to pass the night in a such beautiful spot in the middle of the Drina National Park with a stunning view on the Canyon and the Milky Way galaxy (equipment required: hiking shoes, sleeping bag, tent or hammock, night light/lamp). On the second day, from the black creek you will walk for 8 hours on the edge of Drina Canyon till the panoramic spot of the so-called *White Waters*, and then you reach the village of Jasenova where you will have lunch with a local family. On the way back to Ekometa Village you will cross the village of Slapovici, where you can visit the oldest mosque of Srebrenica. For those who do not feel like walking long distances, there is the opportunity to join a 6 hours boat tour from Perućac Lake to *Black Creek*. This is a different way to know the Drina Canyon directly from water level. There people can swim, dive and have fun.

In addition to the Drina, it is also possible to reach, in 5 hours, the canyon on the Jadar River, following a goat trace. It is a unique experience deep into the wild of East Bosnia, visiting also old water mills, Ottoman tombs, old medieval fortresses and caves used as shelters during the Bosnian war. "*Put one foot in front of the other is one of the most important things we do*", Irvin says.



Image 6. Excursion to Drina Canyon. October 2023. Source: [https://www.facebook.com/srebrenicahope/?locale=it\\_IT](https://www.facebook.com/srebrenicahope/?locale=it_IT)

One goal of the project is to expand the geographic radius of the experiences, involving the close villages of Osmace, Jezero Perucac, Ljeskovik, Jasenova, Potočari and Susnjare. *"In the age of technological capitalism and mass industrialisation, these villages remain an example of sustainable development. They are small oases of peace for mankind and nature, where visitors have the opportunity to get in touch with the soul of the most authentic Bosnia, work the land with their own hands, water the soil with the sweat of their labour, watch vegetables grow and savour the scent of life, food and people,"* Irvin told me, during my visit in summer 2019.

There is a close relationship between history, historical places, memorials, and the elaboration of traumatic events through oral storytelling and writing. Also, nature plays a fundamental role in the processes of healing people and giving destroyed territories the opportunity to rebirth. This concept prompted Irvin and his sister Elvira, -a well-known translator and writer living in Italy - to devise a week-long writing course in the *Ekometta Village*. In May 2023, 7 people came from two countries to join the first writing course. The idea is simple: for one week you share spaces, thoughts, guided tours, meals and labours in a place of untamed nature, far from the usual rhythms of the world and its comforts to experiment through games (e.g. the historical/social/political Goose Game) and exercises of imagination and writing what you are experiencing in order to try to translate into personal narratives all that you have seen, discovered and felt.

### **3.3. Srebrenica Memorial Centre and Cemetery in Potočari**

The cornerstone of the project is a visit to the Srebrenica Memorial Centre and Cemetery in Potočari, built inside the battery factory that served as the quarters of the UN battalion tasked with protecting the enclave of Srebrenica in 1995<sup>12</sup>. The aim of the project is to preserve the memory of the genocide and to fight against the denial and relativisation of these atrocities on the path to transitional justice and peace building (Bell, 2018).

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<sup>12</sup> <https://srebrenicamemorial.org/en>

In Bosnia, the persistence of genocide denial and religious and ethnic intolerance (Hanson, 2020) remain huge obstacles to peace and reconciliation (Bilali et al., 2019). The town's population consists of two dominant ethnic groups and former enemies, the Serbs and the Bosniaks, which, today, live together without physical violence. However, if one stays in town longer, tensions between the groups become apparent, with the ethnic division rooted in the recent history of Srebrenica. A strategy against denial and a step towards reconciliation is the exposure of “moral exemplars” (Čehajić et al., 2017). It is what *Srebrenica City of Hope* does. In this project young Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats work together, increasing the willingness to reconcile (Hamber et al., 2010).

On 25<sup>th</sup> October 2000 the High Representative for Bosnia, Wolfgang Petrisch, issued a decision designating Potočari as location for the cemetery and Memorial (Braun, 2014).



Image 7. The Srebrenica Genocide Memorial and Cemetery in Potočari. Blinken Osa Archivum. Source: <https://www.archivum.org/entries/blog/a-warning-sign-the-srebrenica-genocide-memorial>

Commemoration and remembrance, including through memorials, are essential tools for the postwar government (Buckley-Zistel & Schäfer, 2014). Political power deeply affected memorial planning about site location, display of objects, and the accompanying contextual narrative (Williams, 2007). The Potočari Memorial was placed in the battery factory, built in 1980, used as the United Nations base of the Dutch battalion. This is the place where thousands of people fled when Srebrenica fell (Pollack, 2003). Survivors wanted their loved ones buried at Potočari, because it represented the site of ultimate horror, and it is connected to their sense of home (Pollack, 2003). Using the site of the genocide for the memorial provides an effective emotional jolt to international visitors, and a place of pilgrimage for others (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003).

Five years after the genocide survivors were left with a decision. Out of the 7,000 people who disappeared, the bodies from over 4,000 had been recovered, and stored in a warehouse, even if precious few had been identified. Storage space was running out and more bodies were still being collected from mass graves and from the fields. Survivors had to decide what should be done with the bodies. The first 600 identified victims of the genocide were buried in the Memorial cemetery in March 2003 (Luitjens & Schoorel, 2022). In that year, there were three burials held. Since then, there has been one annual commemoration held each year on the 11<sup>th</sup> July (Petrila & Hasanović, 2021). The ritual



includes prayers because religion has an important role in the process of perception and interpretation of negative experiences, such as genocide (Godobo-Madikizela, 2000). The memorial, opened in 2003 and inaugurated by former US President Bill Clinton, includes a cemetery, a wall of names, and exhibits. In front of the cemetery, one can read the names of the dead carved into a curving expanse of smooth granite. The variety of birth dates indicate that the victims ranged from old men to young teenagers; all the death dates are July 1995. An open-air mosque sits to the left of the main entrance. In the cemetery, you can see the more than 8,000 white stalks silhouetted as far as the eye can see, mute and endless on the meadow. Across the road from the cemetery stands the old car-battery factory where the UN Dutch Battalion stationed itself. That now hosts the Memorial Centre. It stands as a monument of shame to the United Nations. People participating in the project can visit it independently or join a tour guided by witnesses like Irvin or survivors like Hasan Hasanović, who was 19 when the town of Srebrenica fell. He lost his father and twin brother on the death march and now he is the curator and interpreter of the memorial, who asserts that *“I want to speak to people, and share my story because my heart speaks. And now, finally, someone is listening”*, Hasan says (Hasanović, 2019)<sup>13</sup>.

### 3.4. Potočari Memorial permanent exhibitions

Potočari Memorial offers many permanent exhibitions (Hoondert & Van den Berg, 2020) and some temporary ones. *Memorial Room-Personal Stories* was created in 2007. This exhibition is inspired by the Imperial War Museum in London, while the personal stories were collected by Emir Suljagic. It is based on 20 personal belongings of genocide victims which were uncovered in mass graves. The chosen item, whether a torture implement, bone fragment, identity card, clothes or shoes, gains meaning from its surroundings rather than its intrinsic value. The display of human remains provides the starkest example of the narrative tension between shock and sacredness and provokes strong emotional reactions (Hoondert, 2018).



Image 8. Memorial Room-Personal Stories. Artefacts collected from mass grave. Source: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/50917178 Remembering Visiting and Placing the Dead Law Authority and Genocide in Srebrenica/figures?lo=1&utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=organic](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/50917178_Remembering_Visiting_and_Placing_the_Dead_Law_Authority_and_Genocide_in_Srebrenica/figures?lo=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic)

The permanent exhibition *Failure of the International Community* presents the role of the UN peacekeeping forces during the fall of the Srebrenica 'safe zone' in July of 1995. Located on the renovated historical site of the UN Dutch Battalion headquarters, the exhibit recreates the individual rooms used by the battalion between 1994 and 1995, including offices, meeting rooms, and sleeping quarters, on whose walls you can still read the

infamous inscriptions 'No Teeth...? A Mustache...? Smell like shit...? Bosnian Girl', tragic testimony of how Bosnian women were seen and used by the men who were supposed to defend them during the war.



Image 9. Graffiti in Dutchbat-camp in Potočari. Source: Livio Sinigallesi Archive.  
<https://senigallesi.photoshelter.com/image/I0000Qjw45Uqa7h0>

Another permanent exhibition is *Memento* that combines photography and oral history to present 25 historical artifacts donated to the Memorial Centre by survivors of genocide and victims' families which were uncovered in mass graves and along the path of the Death March. A display explains that forensic testing helps identify the victims and that relatives are consulted about the process. Presented alongside the portraits and testimonies of those who donated these items, the exhibition tells the story of life and the struggle for survival during the Srebrenica genocide. There is also a permanent photo exhibition that consists of 80 photographs as well as a four-hour video which capture the horrors experienced by residents and refugees in Srebrenica and the surrounding areas. It was prepared by Bosnian photographer Ziyah Gafic, and includes works by Paul Lowe, Ron Haviv, Gary Knight, and Rod Nordland. The presentation of photographs creates a source of emotional impact for memorial visitors (Linfield, 2010). Such photos raise moral dilemmas about invasion of privacy, voyeurism, and respect for the dead (Lisle, 2011). The video footage was donated by wartime correspondent Tony Birtley and produced by the VII Academy Foundation. The photographs capture the horror and document the trauma and loss, the search for the missing ones, the identification of the remains and the burial of the victims of Srebrenica.



Image 10. The "Memento" exhibition. Source: <https://srebrenicamemorial.org/en/exhibits/memento/3>

*Reading for Srebrenica* is a virtual exhibition<sup>13</sup>, a film in which more than 150 participants read the names of the 8,372 victims of the Srebrenica genocide. The filming of the project took place in different locations, as participants chose a site of personal significance to convey their message of remembrance for the victims of the Srebrenica genocide.

<sup>13</sup> <https://srebrenicamemorial.org/en/exhibits/virtual-exhibition-reading-for-srebrenica/6>

The participants represent a diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds, and include activists, journalists, actors, musicians, artists and religious leaders. Many of them lost loved ones in Srebrenica, and some are survivors and witnesses of genocide themselves.

*Reading for Srebrenica* is designed as a deeply personal commemorative project which emphasizes the individual identity of genocide victims. In the Museum multimedia room visitors can watch a 30-minutes documentary entitled *A week in July*, produced by Sense Tv Tribunal. It tells the story of the genocide through testimonies and verdicts of ICTY. It is hard to watch such a film that shows horrible events, especially the video, recorded by The Scorpions themselves, in which they execute six Muslim men.

In front of those images of death I did not feel like a passive observer, a consumer of the story. I really wanted to become a witness, to study, count and show the world the crimes and the traumatic events that took place in July 1995 in Srebrenica. The knowledge of the horrors is unthinkable, but I tried to collect the scattered pieces of reality.

### 3.5. Potočari Memorial temporary exhibition

In addition to permanent exhibitions, the Memorial Centre works extensively with the art community in Bosnia - Herzegovina and around the world to convey the story of Srebrenica through a variety of creative platforms, media, painting, photographs, aimed at honouring the memory of the victims of Srebrenica through art.

One example is *Exodus* by the Bosnian painter Safet Zec<sup>14</sup>, an artistic testimony to human tragedy and to the futility of violence, consisting of three separate cycles: *Hands on the Face*, *Tears* and *Hugs*. The first cycle represents Srebrenica women covering their eyes with their hands, masking their faces save for the deep grooves that bite into their foreheads. In *Tears* infinite postures, expressions and dimensions of the human body, hands, faces, including diverse details such as fingernails or tears, represent diaspora, solitude, abandonment, hope, faith, suspension and silence. *Hugs* is inspired and dedicated to the tragic death of Admira Ismić and Boško Brkić, Sarajevo's Romeo and Juliet.



Image 11. Safet Zec Exhibition in Srebrenica Memorial. Source: [www.baytalfann.com](http://www.baytalfann.com)

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<sup>14</sup> [www.safetzec.com](http://www.safetzec.com)



Image 12. A painting from "Hands". Source: <https://it.pinterest.com/pin/811140582866858285/>



Image 13. A painting of a grieving mother from Srebrenica, from "Tears". Source: photo by Ahmedin Đozić.



Image 14. A painting from "Embraces". Source: <https://safetzec.maona.si>

For almost 30 years, Safet Zec, a war refugee in Italy, has been transposing powerful emotions onto canvas, driven by deep compassion for human suffering and horror at the extraordinary evil of which humanity is capable. Through these works, Zec conveys the outer limits of anguish, embodied in the violent destruction of love and life in Srebrenica.

The visit to the Potočari memorial includes free access to the library, archive and documentation centre that provides an essential contribution to currently available oral history material focused on Bosnia-Herzegovina and the events of the 1992-1995 conflict. It serves as a valuable resource for scholars, educators and students, curators and researchers, NGO activists, not only citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina, because it is global in impact.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Participants in *Srebrenica City of Hope* come into contact with people representing a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, including activists, journalists, actors, musicians, artists and religious leaders. Many lost loved ones in Srebrenica, and some are themselves survivors and witnesses of the genocide. Joining *Srebrenica City of Hope* project, you can look at the "difficult" western Bosnia history through a different lens, as a place that attracts tourists, a heritage site, and a place that holds many painful memories (Walters, 2014).

*Srebrenica City of Hope* is committed to a fact-based approach and promotes tolerance, dialogue and collective healing. It includes oral history testimonies of genocide survivors and family members of those who were killed, as well as stories of ordinary people living and struggling for survival during the war. Going beyond, official amnesia and "repressive silencing" (Huyssen, 2003) fosters reconciliation. It creates a strong emotional involvement, both for inhabitants and visitors, who can go through a learning experience of recovery in which nature and cultural heritage become central to rebuilding a post-genocide society. It is a concrete example of how places that have experienced war can be transformed into instruments for a return to life; it is a successful attempt to visit places of remembrance not only as a destination for dark grief tourism but an experience where people rebuild peace and hope.

The project is moving forward by creating a network of people working together in different villages in the Srebrenica area to cope with a distressing oppression of memory. Its project aims to restore a future for the town and show that where there has been a tragedy, hope can and must be reborn. "Come to meet the Good Bosnian, this is what we are" is *Srebrenica City of Hope* slogan. This project comes at a time of vital historical importance for Europe and humanity as a whole. Faced with the economic crisis, the spread of nationalism, xenophobic movements, violations of human rights, wars and climate change, it seems important to help the world not focalising only on our life experiences.

*"We often ask ourselves, why us? Why were the lives of 8,372 people taken on that 11 July 1995? In order for our loved ones not to have died in vain, Srebrenica must become a warning to the whole of humanity of where nationalism and religious fanaticism lead and what the consequences are".* This is the aim, not only the dream, of the founder, Irvin.



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