



# REMEMBERING SREBRENICA

## ACTS OF COURAGE

### Standing Up, Speaking Out – Hasan Nuhanović



I come from Vlasenica, a little town in Eastern Bosnia, near Srebrenica. When the war broke out, I was in my fourth year in Sarajevo, studying mechanical engineering. Many people were talking about leaving the country, but it was not an option for my parents. Most people were a bit naïve, and thought everything would be resolved in a few weeks. When we finally decided to leave Bosnia, it was too late to get out.

The year April 1992 to April 1993 was the worst experience of our lives. Worse than July 1995, even though that is when my family was killed. The suffering was extreme. We were stuck in the mountains, with no food, starving. We moved to those villages that were able to defend themselves, and decided to move towards Srebrenica in September 1992. We couldn't go by road, so we had to climb down steep cliffs at night, then, go downriver by boat. When dawn came, the shelling started again from Serbia, but somehow we survived, walking to Srebrenica on foot. But when we arrived, we realised we were stuck again. Srebrenica was besieged. They were bombing the town - by artillery, from the air - for six months. People would go to their burned, destroyed villages and take cattle food out of their silos to eat. We were starving. Even though the Srebrenica fighters were trying to hold Serb forces back from the town, by March 1993 it became clear that they could no longer hold the lines.

On the very day that we thought the Serbs would take the town and massacre us all, we heard on the radio that the UN Security Council had declared Srebrenica a safe area. We didn't know what a UN safe area meant, but the word "safe" sounded promising. The next day, when the Canadians arrived, was the first day in a year that people dared to walk out in the street. I had tears in my eyes, we all did. We loved the Canadians. We loved the UN. And we thought: maybe, we are not going to die.

The UN's arrival froze the genocide that was taking place against the Bosniak people. We knew that if the Serbs attacked Srebrenica again, and the UN didn't stop them, there would undoubtedly be another massacre. When the UN called for NATO air strikes to stop the attack on the "safe area" of Gorazde in 1994, we thought the UN would do the same if anything happened in Srebrenica. That is why, when July 1995 came, everyone expected to hear the sound of NATO jets until the moment when the town finally fell.

The attack had started on 6 July. I'd been translating for the UN, but had promised my parents I would collect my brother if it looked like the town would fall, so I went under



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heavy fire to fetch him. He was the first civilian inside the UN base at Potocari. My parents arrived with the big crowd of older men, women and children that came to the base when the town fell. They were some of the first to arrive so they managed to get inside the base. 25,000 others were not so lucky, and were left outside when the Dutch UN troops closed the gates.

When the Serbs arrived on 12 July, they separated all the men and boys from outside the base, and deported all the women and girls, but they did not enter the base itself. I thought we would be safe inside the base, but then the Dutch soldiers told those inside the base to get out. Under the UN flag, 5,000 refugees were marched to the gate one by one, where the Serbs took the men and boys to their deaths. My family was one of the last to leave. The Dutch told me: "Tell your family to leave. They can't stay here anymore." I never saw them again.

From that day until today, 23 years later, I have needed to find out what happened to my family, and to the other people who were missing. At first I wasn't even thinking about justice. I just wanted to find out what happened. I was begging the government of the Netherlands to tell me, and to start an investigation into those who had made the decision to turn the refugees out at Potočari, but they wouldn't engage with me. They said I was too emotional, too loud. Then finally this Dutch lawyer came to me and said "I'll represent you". We didn't expect to win, but I wanted to get to truth. We couldn't establish the truth any other way, so we would try and do it in the courtroom.

It took ten years, and so many obstacles to get to the final judgement that we both nearly gave up, but we never did. The final verdict, from the Supreme Court of the Netherlands, was all in Dutch but I remember looking over at the lawyer and she was smiling. It was the first time ever that a government had been found liable for its troops on a UN mission. I didn't feel victory, or even satisfaction. I just felt relieved that this fight was over. I was thinking about my parents, and my brother. I was doing this for them. What else could I have done?

My father was identified ten years after he was killed in the genocide. Like most victims, he was identified by the International Commission for Missing Persons using DNA. My brother and mother were identified after fifteen years. All three of them are buried in the graveyard at Potočari. I've had to fight so long and so hard just to find out what happened, who was responsible, even to establish the Memorial Centre where they are buried. Even after 23 years, the story is still not finished.