

Ramiza Gurdić



Ramiza is a member of the Movement of Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclaves. She recalls those days in Srebrenica like they were hell on earth, where people were killing themselves trying to escape what was coming. She lost her husband, 2 sons and 33 members of her family.

“My husband Junuz was 42 when he was killed. My sons Mustafa and Mehrudin were just 2 out of over 8,000 men and boys who were brutally killed in Srebrenica in 1995. 24 years have passed since their deaths. Mustafa was buried in 2005, Junuz in 2009 and Mehrudin 2010, but the memories of what happened – the screams, the shots and most unbearable of all, the terrified pleading eyes of my son Mustafa – will continue to haunt me for the rest of my life. My last sight of Mustafa came as I was being driven from Srebrenica by bus. I saw a cowering group of prisoners by the roadside under armed guard. They were part of the column of men and boys who had tried to escape through the woods. As the bus passed, a Bosnian Serb soldier shouted out to the women “Recognise your sons and husbands. This will be the last time you see them”. I looked up and saw that one of them was Mustafa. We made eye contact and then he bowed his head. It was the last time I saw him alive. I do not know what happened to Mehrudin. As for my husband Junuz, he was seen with a group of 1,000 captured men and boys who were herded into a warehouse and slaughtered. All of them were so gentle and kind-hearted. There isn’t a day that goes by where I don’t think about them. I still go to bed with pain and wake up with sadness.

I could tell you about all of the horrors that I witnessed there with my own eyes. I saw a pregnant woman slaughtered. I saw a young boy who must have been only about 10 years old decapitated by a Serbian soldier in front of my own eyes.

Yet here I am 24 years later, having lost my loved ones, whilst the perpetrators of these crimes walk free and get to talk and see their family. Where is the justice in that? We live among people who know where our children are buried, but they refuse to tell us. We have politicians who feel no shame in making statements in public that deny that a genocide was committed.

We will never stop fighting for truth and justice. As we women grow older, we feel the weight of responsibility on our shoulders to ensure that our stories, and the stories of our loved ones are heard and remembered, and that when we are gone, others will continue to fight for justice."

Kadefa Rizvanović



Kadefa Rizvanović fled to Srebrenica in 1992, two days after giving birth. Here, she speaks to us about the courage and strength that women needed to survive the long years under siege, and the terrible events of July 1995.

“On the 7th of May 1992 I went into labour. My mother-in-law and her mother-in-law delivered my baby at home. Villages around us were burning. We were afraid for our lives. On the 12th of May, we finally had to leave. We headed off through the forest – my late husband and his family, me and my two day old baby. As I had just given birth, I could hardly walk. I begged them to leave me behind, so they did not risk their lives, to take my baby and leave me behind. My husband said: “I will carry you, but I won’t leave you”. 22 days later we reached Srebrenica. We found an empty Serbian house and I was allowed to stay there because of the baby. Seventeen of us stayed in that house. We stayed there in terrible suffering until 1995, hungry and thirsty, exhausted, without clothes, electricity, or water. There was a huge food crisis. Most of the women went through the territories under Serb control to find food, to bring it back in order to survive. There were women who were going and digging so they could feed their children. It was a huge struggle to survive. It was hard, but we had to be strong.

In July 1995, Serbs started firing their weapons on the town. Masses of people from Srebrenica started moving towards Potočari. We left the house, and arrived at my brother’s place near the gas station. There were so many people there that we couldn’t breathe. My husband gave me a hug and told me: “Look after the children, I must go”. I never saw him again. Then the men started heading in a column, through the woods, under heavy fire. My daughter was three years old, and she walked all the way to Potočari with me. Her shoes were filled with blood from blisters, but she didn’t cry, she didn’t say a word. I was carrying my 14 month old son but I slipped and dropped him on the asphalt. He wasn’t giving any signs of life, until my mother took a bottle of water and sprayed him. When we arrived at Potočari, we could hear screaming in the distance. Then they started separating us. A Serbian soldier, unknown to me, came and tried to take a boy away. My mother said: “He’s only a child; he’s not even 10 years old”. He kicked him with his foot and said: “No one’s asking questions here”. They never brought him back. Many men were taken like that. Then the trucks to transport us to the free territory of Kladanj arrived. When we got to the trucks, they started separating men from women. We started moving towards Kladanj; we stopped every now and then: slowdowns, checkpoints, mistreatments, swearing, “They betrayed you”, “nobody wants you”, spitting, pouring water on us. We had to bear all of it.

When we finally got to Tuzla, I went to stay with my brother. I was begging my brother to go and seek information about my husband: did anybody see him, what happened? But no one knew anything. In 2003 they told me that they had found my husband. He was found in Pilica, Zvornik. What monsters are they? To drive him so many kilometers away, maltreat and hide him there. I simply cannot understand that another human could do something like that.”

Lejla Damon



Lejla Damon was born on Christmas day in war-torn Bosnia in 1992. Like thousands of other women, Lejla's birth mother had been repeatedly raped as part of an ethnic cleansing regime orchestrated by the Bosnian Serb army. Many children born of rape during the Balkan conflict have grown up isolated and rejected from society. But Lejla, whose parents smuggled her out of Sarajevo and brought her to London, has overcome the stigma many could not shake. Lejla, now a poised, articulate and incredibly determined young woman, shares her story.

"I was born in Sarajevo on Christmas day in 1992. My birth mother was a Bosnian Muslim, who had been held at a concentration camp and raped. My parents were in Bosnia reporting on the war when they came across my story. They arrived at the hospital to interview my birth mother. She told them that she didn't want to hold me because if she did, she might strangle me. Like many other children born of rape, I would have ended up at an orphanage had my parents not decided to adopt me. So I became one of two children smuggled out of Bosnia during the war. We lived in Hungary for three years and then I came to the UK, which is where I have lived ever since.

In school, I was the only adopted child in my small class and not many of my peers knew where Bosnia was. Trying to explain to them that the country had been ravaged by war was difficult, particularly as I was too young myself to understand what was happening there. But I always knew I was different.

I was told at seven years old that I was adopted. I had started asking questions about when and where I was born. I didn't learn the horrific circumstances surrounding my birth until I was 18. As if by some stroke of fate, I had asked for tickets to Bosnia for a holiday with my friend. That's when my parents decided to sit me down and explain exactly what had happened. They told me that my birth mother had been imprisoned and sexually assaulted, and they explained the consequent trauma she had suffered from, which made her incapable of looking after me. Of course it was difficult to listen to because I felt so very detached from the situation. I hadn't experienced any kind of conflict first hand, so it was a struggle to understand the extent of abuse she and so many others had suffered, and why she didn't want to keep me. But as I got older and began to research the scale of atrocities that occurred during the war, it became easier to comprehend the injustice she had suffered.

I have loved growing up in London; it is my home. I think it's the best place to be to learn about different people and their cultures. I still feel a connection to Bosnia and we have family friends there who I have visited several times. They all have their own stories of the war and their opinions differ, which provides me with a well-rounded view of what happened. I value this a lot, as I am still learning new things about the Balkan conflict. So it's important that I can interact with people who can offer varying perspectives and experiences."

Dr Fatima Dautbašić-Klempić



Dr Fatima Dautbašić-Klempić was one of five doctors in Srebrenica at the time of the siege and one of the few women who joined the men on what became known as the ‘Death March’.

“During the siege things got worse and worse. One day, people were in a big crowd in front of the middle school in Srebrenica and then the shelling starts. It’s impossible to describe how it was after that; dead everywhere, parts of bodies, blood on the buildings around us on the road – everywhere. In that one moment we counted that 56 people were killed.

When the town fell, I was really afraid that if I went to the UN base, I would not survive. I was afraid of being killed or raped, so I decided to go the mountains with the men. Whether or not I survived, I wanted to decide about my own life. My mother was too old to come with us – I cannot remember the moment that we said goodbye outside the hospital without crying. We knew it might be the last time we were together.

The journey was like Russian Roulette. You know when you’re having a dream and you’re trying to run, but you can’t. Your legs are really heavy and it’s that feeling that you will never reach the top of the hill. It became impossible to step on the ground; you were just walking over bodies because so many dead people were lying there.

When we were walking through the mountains, we didn’t know who was alive, dead or captured or what happened to anybody – you could only see a small part of the column. But when we arrived in Tuzla we realised that only about 4,000 people had made it. We still thought that the rest would come, but days and days passed and then we realised that many people had been killed. How is it possible that if 15,000 people left Srebrenica, only 4,000 people reached Tuzla?

I lost 17 people from my father’s family – his brothers, their sons and even some grandsons. My mother lost a brother and his two sons. My three aunts all lost their husbands and sons. That’s over 40 people from our family, but I used to say that I didn’t only lose members of my family, I also lost my friends and my patients.

I now live in Tuzla, but once a month I go back to Srebrenica to do a clinic for new and expectant mothers, because there are no Gynaecologists there. Something inside of me asks me again and again to go there. I feel a lot of emotions for people who went back and are able to live there.”

Bakira Hasečić



In April 1992, while at home with her husband and two daughters, Bakira Hasečić answered a knock on her door. The local police chief, along with 15 other men entered her home. They placed the family on house arrest, repeatedly raped Bakira and her eldest daughter and robbed them of their savings. This is her story.

Born on a hot summer's day in 1953 in Višegrad, Bakira has never called another place home. "Before the war began, I had lived here all my life. My husband and I built our home near Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge, on the left bank of the Drina River." It was here that Bakira and her husband lived in peace with their two daughters. "We had everything we needed for an easy life. My husband and I both worked hard. We lived in a very close, tight-knit community, celebrating holidays with all our neighbours, irrespective of their backgrounds—no one differentiated between nationalities or faith. We were all just one, big community."

Sadly, this was not to last. A few weeks in April 1992 would render Bakira's life forever changed. "My neighbour, police officer Veljko Planincic, came to my house and brought with him Serb soldiers from Arilje." They demanded money, which Bakira handed over. But that was not enough. Bakira's 18-yearold daughter was raped before her very eyes. When she tried to pull the soldiers away, she too was raped. "They acted like beasts; preying on us. One of them, Milan Lukić, knew me well. I had helped and supported his family prior to the war. My very own friends, who I had trusted, turned into monsters. It was like we never really knew each other. Before then, I didn't know what they were capable of doing just because we had different religions." Bakira recounts the whole town coming under Serb control. At the time, Višegrad had a 60% Muslim majority population. Following the Serb onslaught, civilians were arrested all over the town. Višegrad became subject to a carefully orchestrated ethnic cleansing regime as rape camps were set up, including the notorious Vilinas Vlas hotel where an estimated 200 women were imprisoned as sex slaves. "They used multiple locations to carry out mass rape: the police station, the local sports center, even the institute for the protection of children," Bakira recalls.

Milan Lukić, Bakira's former neighbour and rapist, is currently serving a life sentence handed down by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia at The Hague (ICTY). Lukić was the sadistic mastermind behind the Vilinas Vlas rape camp. But his charge sheet carries two counts for mass murder, not rape. How does that make her feel, I ask. "I have a right to justice and truth, and to see criminals receive their well earned punishment.

Seventeen members of Bakira's family have been killed. "I've heard that my sister was held in Vlasenica with several others and raped repeatedly. When they were done with her, they killed her. Her remains were found in three different mass graves."

Fatima



Fatima' was 14 years old when she was raped by a Serb soldier during the 'ethnic cleansing' of her village by Bosnian Serb forces. We interviewed Fatima in Tuzla, where she courageously shared her story with us.

"I was 14. One day they told us there would be no more school. We heard rumours about a war, but didn't take it seriously. We even heard about a few attacks on villages, but these were far away. We did not think this would happen to us. Then they came to our village. It was early in the morning when Serb soldiers came to the village. They captured my father and brought him back to our house at gunpoint. They forced us outside, tied our hands, and set our home on fire. They separated the men and women and made us form a column. I was the first in the line. A soldier came over and yelled at me – "You, come here!" I didn't even realise he was calling me. Then he made my father come and stand in front of me. It wasn't until I saw the tears in my father's eyes that I understood what was about to happen. They were going to take me away, and they wanted him to see. They marched me into the woods with my hands up. I saw a lot of Serbian soldiers who were wearing thick masks made of socks. They did not want their faces to be seen."

She is calm, almost dispassionate, as she describes what happened after the soldiers had finished raping her. The Serb soldier wanted to kill me when he was finished. But another soldier stopped him. I couldn't see his face – it was covered in a bloodstained shirt – I could only see only his eyes. He said to the soldier who attacked me "What are you doing, don't you have a sister of your own?" I cannot describe what it was like to watch two men fight over whether they are going to kill you or not. He forced me to get up. I don't know how I did it, but I got up and I somehow settled my clothes. He forced me to walk in front with my hands up, prodding a gun in my back. He was cursing me and threatening to kill me. As we came back to the road, all I could see was blood, blood everywhere. I couldn't believe it when I saw that my brother and father were still alive. It was terrifying, knowing they could be killed at any second. Then the soldiers started to beat my father. That was probably the hardest moment for me."

The soldiers left me at the side of the road. They told me not to run, or they would find me and kill me. They started killing the men in front of the women and children. There was so much hate towards us Muslims. They were even killing children – looking for the youngest males to kill. Even women joined in on the killing. I saw two women kill a man in a wheelchair – they wanted to kill a baby too, just because he was crying. Buses arrived to take the women and children away. I decided to try and escape on the second bus. I hid behind the seats to avoid being spotted by the Serb soldiers. It hurt so much to leave without knowing what had happened to my father, I couldn't stop crying. We thought we were being taken to safety. Then the bus stopped in the Serb territory of Kravica – the soldier had orders to take us off the bus and kill us. But the Serb women of Kravica had other ideas. They broke in to the bus and yelled at the driver, "What are you doing? These women are innocent, take them to their own territory". The driver was arguing, saying that he was under orders, and that the Serbs would kill his family if he disobeyed. But the women of Kravica stood firm and forced the driver take us to the free territory. We were Muslim, and they were Serb, but they saved our lives that day."