

Because I Was There

A Student's Journey to Understand Mass Killings in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Ten Years After

by Andrew Holcom

Photo credits: Andrew Holcom

It still doesn't make sense to me. I suppose war is a subject that is often irrational, but after my excursion to Bosnia, the war that crippled the Balkans makes even less sense to me than it did before I went. Before my class, Anthropology 456, *War and Human Rights*, I had never even heard of Srebrenica. Little did I know that five months later, I would find myself photographing a recently discovered mass grave, not two miles away from the UN headquarters established for the protection of this small Muslim village.

Every day while on my journey, I would stop and ask myself, "Who in the hell do you think you are, coming here, knowing next to nothing about the misery these people have suffered? What gives you the right to peer into their pain? How could you possibly grieve with them?" I found grieving to be the easiest thing for me to do.

I have always had an interest in war. As a child, most of it took the form of fascination with weaponry. As I contemplate that, I realize it was really a fascination with power, and the power that weapons give a person. I didn't read much when I was young, but I do remember reading *Gun Digest Assault Weapons 3rd Edition* almost cover to cover when I was ten. World War II, the most capitalized-upon war of all time, maintained my focus through middle and high school. In fact, the Nazis were what really kept me interested. The way they dressed, the colors they used, their huge parades; they were the ultimate symbol of power. Then, my freshman year of high school, I learned the truth about the Holocaust.

"How could this be? Who could justify this to themselves? What were they thinking?" Questions came without answers for me. I look back and I know that I was looking in the wrong places. If there was one thing I learned in the *War and Human Rights* class, it was that war is a part of what it means to be human. Mass killings are simply a grand expression of ultimate power. I had to account for the powerless, not just the powerful.

Studying elementary education simultaneously with the anthropology of war gave me further insight into this aspect of human nature. Bullying, bigotry, name-calling, labeling, *otherizing*; these are the roots of genocide. At its core, a group must separate itself in appearance, in dress, in action, or simply in label before it can justify and thus carry out genocide. As I learned in Classroom Management (Elementary Education 424), every action is justified from the point of view of the actor. Every action is preceded by a reason to act, regardless of moral or ethical implications.

"I am not an expert. In fact, I have very little experience with war or knowledge of it. But I know what war takes, what it destroys. I know because I have felt it well up inside me. Because it steals my thoughts late at night, even to this day. Because I have stood in the midst of the aftermath. Because I was there."



Andrew Holcom with Professor Young and anthropology colleagues.

"Studying elementary education simultaneously

Watching videos from Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and from Bosnia, witnessing barbarity on tape, live

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and raw, I could hardly believe that it was true. These murders were precise. They were calculated and deliberate. Most of all, they were backed by political and ideological rhetoric that sustained them.

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I came to Bosnia more out of chance than design. As the final Anthropology class for my Bachelors degree at Western Washington University, I had three classes that I wanted to take, but none of the three was what I needed: cross-cultural education. Of the three, the one that seemed most amenable was *War and Human Rights*; I have always been interested in finding ways to talk to children about the realities, rather than the fictions, of war. I had no idea what I was in for. Class time was filled with discussions of the most horrible things I had ever learned. Mass killings, organized rape camps, amputations and misery filled my thoughts and my conversations. My friends slowly pulled away from me. I needed something; something to convince me that this is not all there is in people. Something that would help me release my fear and anger and disgust with mankind. I needed those who had been killed to not be lost; to not be forgotten and washed away by time. I needed proof that those out to erase a people had failed. That something came in an e-mail to my professor just after the quarter ended.

Kathleen contacted me and told me about a conference being put together by the University of Sarajevo with the intent of compiling all of the evidence collected by scholars from around the world on the events that unfolded in Srebrenica. The conference was to begin on the tenth anniversary of the massacre. Kathleen had been asked to speak on her research at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. She asked if any of us from the war class (as we called it) would like to accompany her. I jumped at the opportunity, not just for an excuse to go to Europe after I graduated, but also to find some of the closure I had needed. I asked her if there was any way I could receive university credit for going on this trip, and she told me to bring my camera and take responsibility for photo-documenting our experiences.

I planned a month-long trek through Central Europe that would get me to Bosnia a few days before the conference started. My thought was to see a bit of the reality left behind after the fall of the Iron Curtain. I flew into Berlin, Germany, and took the train from there to Prague, CZ, Vienna, AT, and into the former Yugoslav republics of Slovenia and Croatia. From Croatia I flew into Bosnia & Herzegovina (BiH). I really had no idea how I would be received in these totally foreign places where the only other language I spoke was rudimentary German.

My travels went better than I could have predicted, every city having many wonderful things to offer. By the time I made it to Croatia, I was relaxed and at peace with traveling alone and with only vague plans of where to be. The day before I entered Bosnia, I took a chance. Some back home would have said I took a chance with my life. I say I took a chance on living my life, and touching someone else's.

On the train to Zagreb, Croatia, I met a small family in my coach: A young man, Mladen, age twenty-eight, with his wife Natasha and their two young boys. They came into my coach, and we exchanged small talk about our trips. When they heard I was headed to Zagreb for the night, they told me, in the best English they could manage (miles better than my almost non-existent Croatian) that Zagreb was not a safe place to hang around in and that I should watch my bag closely. They took me by surprise when, no more than twenty minutes after they had met me, I was offered a bed in their home. Can you imagine—a young family meets a total stranger on a train who speaks basically none of their language, and they invite him to stay with them and their two young sons? We are definitely not in America anymore, Andrew.

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Vincovci is a small town in eastern Croatia, deep inside the Slavonia region and very near to the border with Serbia. This whole region was home to the war in Croatia. It didn't much look it when I arrived with my host family, but night hides many details. We walked from the train station to a tall, communist era apartment building. Mladen's flat was small yet comfortable, and his hospitality was like a river washing over me. After seven hours sitting on a train, the hide-a-bed was heaven.

The next morning I awoke to Natasha making copious amounts of pancakes with marmalade. After we ate breakfast, Mladen took me on a tour of his town. This guy, who solely supported his family on his job at the bakery, didn't have a second thought about buying me coffee, offering me cigarettes, or spending his obviously valuable time off leading me around the town. He knew every single person we passed, all of them stopping to have a quick chat and shake my hand. Perhaps he was just showing off the American he found on the train.

Mladen and I talked as much as our language skills would allow, mostly about life here in Vincovci. I was most interested in hearing about his life ten years ago during the war. It seems that the majority of the residents stayed in the town when the fighting arrived and it came under attack. And why not? This was their home, and the home of their parents. We have such a different perspective of home in America; it was at times difficult for me to understand. Mladen was frustrated with his English skills, which were incredible for having been learned solely by watching Hollywood movies, so he took me to meet his friend Antonio for further conversation.



***Communist era style
apartment building***

We walked to yet another old communist-style apartment building and went up to Antonio's flat. He welcomed us as honored guests and his wife fried some zucchini for us to snack on. As he spoke, explaining how the war had affected his family, his town and his country, I started to cry. He was so beautiful, all of them were; everyone I had met was radiating their love of life and brotherhood towards each other... and all I could think about was what the war had done. It took their parents, their friends of many years, and it nearly took them. These beautiful people... I just couldn't hold back the tears in my eyes. So many people just like them—taken. Not as soldiers, but as civilians... as parents... as children. And my country did nothing to help them. We could have... we could have done something. Maybe we didn't see these beautiful people. Maybe all we saw was former communists, eastern Europeans, people who were not like us. They were fighting to be free, to become a democracy, something we have gone to war for in other countries... so why not this one?

I loved them all for letting me be there: to hear their stories, to share their suffering, and to feel their love and their hope. The "Hand of God," as Antonio would say, led him out of his apartment and into the basement of the building just before a shell ripped through the wall and decimated his entire flat. That same hand brought me to him, allowed me to meet him, and reminded me that we all feel the same pain and share the same hope. We are alive, and he knew far better than I, that there is no gift more precious.

This experience helped to prepare me emotionally for Bosnia. Of all the former Yugoslav republics, Bosnia wears the most scars from the war. Walking the streets of Sarajevo, the capital, I would pass building after building riddled with bullet and mortar holes, many of which had been patched so that life could resume. Some businesses have tried to hide the history of their buildings with facades and awnings, but if you take a step back, the full picture comes into view.

In Sarajevo, people could not walk the streets without the protection of night for almost three years. It was a living city under siege. I remember learning about medieval sieges in which an army might simply wait for the castle-dwellers to run out of food and leave, but this was much different. This was a siege of long and drawn-out death, not only of the body, but of the spirit as well. Sarajevo was under UN protection, meaning the UN tried to bring in food and dispense water, but they did not act to stop the near-constant shelling by mortars and shootings by snipers from the hills surrounding the city.

About 430,000 people lived in Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital, at the beginning of the siege, and now ten years after the end of the war about 400,000 people



War-torn building, bullet damage, and bomb "sun" hole filled with red cement, known as a "Sarajevo Rose"

live in the city. Bosnia had a prewar population of about 4.5 million, but the war in the Former Yugoslavia killed an estimated 200,000 people. Today, Sarajevo exists in the midst of cemeteries with headstones extending for miles and miles. It's a beautiful city, nestled in a low valley with rolling hills on all sides. Sarajevo was a popular tourist city before the war. In fact, the 1984 Winter Olympics were held there, solidifying Bosnia's value to the west and declaring itself a part of Europe, not just a part of the Eastern European Bloc. Today, the Olympic headquarters is an empty shell, desolate and ominous. The Olympic Stadium became the largest cemetery in Bosnia.

One of the most staggering reminders of the war is the one best not forgotten. Before heading to Bosnia, I read the U.S. Department of State Travel Warning, which informed me that at the very least 500,000 mines and unexploded ordinance were still active and unaccounted for across the country. Teams of foreign workers have been clearing minefields since 1995, but the job is obviously far from complete. All of their scenic countryside forests and meadows appear vacant, no longer safe for camping or picnics.

I had been traveling alone for two weeks through central Europe prior to my flight into Sarajevo. By sheer coincidence I was on the very same plane my professor and mentor was taking with her daughter. This was profoundly lucky for me because I was arriving two days early and had no idea where to go or where to sleep that night. We got into Sarajevo around 10 p.m. and, having no idea what we should do, we asked our taxi driver to take us to a cheap

hotel. The driver was a large, gruff man who was very patient as we tried to communicate. He, as with so many others I later met, lived in Sarajevo his whole life and was not forthcoming with information about things he had experienced there. It seems like it was a collective bad dream that most people want to erase from their memory.

The next day we headed into town to the infamous and now

renovated Sarajevo Holiday Inn, continually shelled during the war and made famous to many Americans because of the Woody Harrelson movie, *Welcome to Sarajevo*.

The conference was housing all of the presenters there and was paying for accommodations for all the students in another hotel. This alone must have been quite a sum of money to pay, but on top of it, breakfast, lunch and dinner were provided for all conference participants five days in a row. This doesn't even include the materials given out (specifically the custom-made briefcases with full-color photograph books, notepads and pens inside), which seemed fairly pricey. This raised my suspicions and



City of Sarajevo surrounded by cemeteries



Sarajevo: Holiday Inn

kept me
even
more
critical
of what
was
said
than I



**View of Sarajevo from
hillside sniper post**

normally would be.

After Kathleen got settled into her room at the Holiday Inn, we went about exploring the city. As the team's photographer, I was instructed to, "Document the current state of things," meaning I took more pictures of residual scars and decay than of people or scenic views.

While walking south along Marshall Tito Boulevard, Kathleen spotted a small field of white pillars up on the hill past the national library. She explained to me that Muslim headstones were shaped differently than Christian tablet-style headstones. Muslims used a three foot tall white obelisk with a passage from the Quran inscribed underneath the deceased's name and dates of life. The top would be pointed if it were a woman's stone and rounded for a man. We ascended this steep hill and, coming to the top, we found a graveyard extending along the top of the hill for 300 meters. This was a post-war cemetery, most deaths falling between 1995 and 2003. Only upon reflection later did I realize that the vast majority of these graves were the graves of women.

Kathleen walked up through the cemetery while I walked around the outside along the road so I could get a better sense of the place. She called out to me, "Oh my god! You will not believe this!" I headed up into the cemetery, staying off the grass for fear of mines, and found her standing alone in the middle of the graves. She told me that a pack of wild dogs, maybe 25, had been lying in the cemetery when she came up. They had fled by the time I arrived, but that wasn't what made this weird. They had been completely silent. I didn't hear them move at all, and none of them made so much as a low growl. Silent remnants of the lives of those dead and lost.

As we began to leave the cemetery, we met a Japanese man on vacation, whose name for the life of me I can not remember. He had been in Scotland involved with something related to the G-8 conference going on at the time, but chose to spend a few of his days off in Bosnia because of the ten year anniversary of Srebrenica. He came with the specific intent of bearing witness to the events that had unfolded and the suffering still lingering long after the war, all on his own during his vacation.

He ended up meeting us later at the Holiday Inn, where he just happened to be staying. He and I sat and talked for a long time, our conversation darting here and there on topics focused around the political climates of our countries and international politics in general. He graciously invited me to join him on a tour of Sarajevo the next day; a tour which he had already paid for and just so happened to be the same price for one or two people. The tour, dubbed "The Mission Impossible

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**Dr. Young walking through a
Muslim cemetery**

Tour", was done all by private car and took us through the entire city and up into the outlying areas of interest. This was yet another example for me of the "Hand of God", or whatever you want to call it, leading me during this excursion and helping me understand. Early the next morning, I was on my way to meet him, camera in hand.



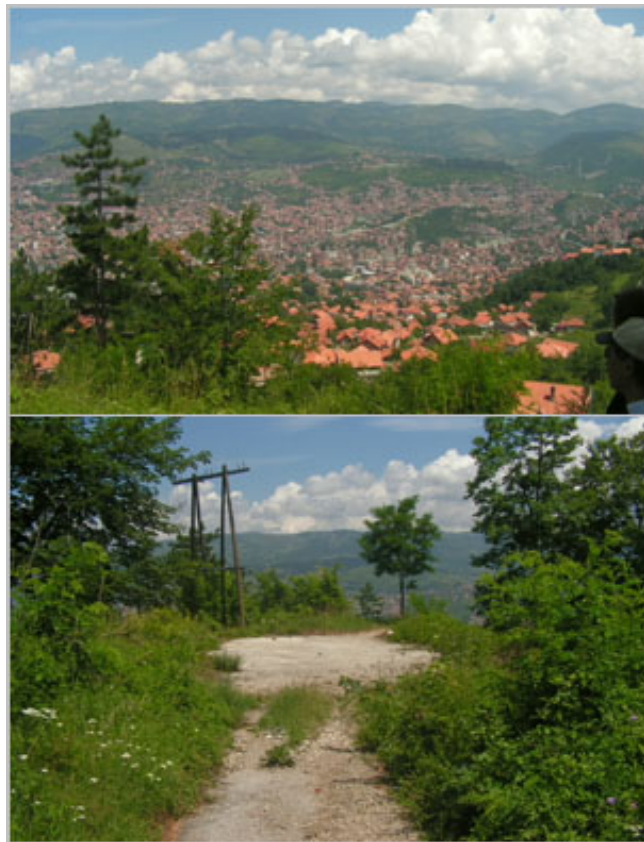
The Bosnian countryside is littered with landmines.

Our tour guide could not have been more well-suited to his profession. He was a lifetime resident of Sarajevo who was employed by the International Red Cross during the war. To start off the tour, he took us up to the shell of the maternity hospital on top of a small rise. From there, we could see what he called a panoramic view of life in Sarajevo, from birth to death. With the hospital at your side, you could look out onto the Olympic stadium and fields constructed for the 1984 Olympic Games. Continuing your turn brought your gaze down onto the war cemetery. Now, I have visited a few cemeteries in my life, but this one was on a whole different plane; the most massive, sobering expanse of graves as to almost be unimaginable. Completing the circle, you would see what appeared to be a vast vacant plot of land with the lone shell of a residence. This space has

remained vacant since the end of the war because of its not-so-unique characteristic of being a minefield.

The tour took us to all of the historically important sites in the city, such as the exact spot where many believe World War I started (the place where Franz Ferdinand was assassinated). We also ventured up into the hillsides surrounding Sarajevo; the hills that during the war concealed Bosnian Serb artillery and snipers. Prior to the war, a moderately-sized hotel up on the hill face was the honeymooner's getaway, with a gorgeous sweeping view of the red-roofed city below. Quickly, the hotel shut down as things began to ferment in Bosnia and it was taken by the Serbs, its scenic view now a strategic asset for tanks and artillery. A concrete landing just below the hotel allowed these weapons a stable base and clear line of sight into the southern portion of the city. Just below this landing, an unmarked, overgrown minefield still lays in wait for anyone trying to ascend the hillside.

All of the hills surrounding Sarajevo had placements just like this one, as well as lower outcroppings and landings for snipers to fire from. Citizens had to be careful when venturing outside for water, wood for fires, or UN humanitarian aid. Most traffic was done under the cover of darkness, but some chose not to go out at all. Many areas in the city quickly became infamous for their vulnerability, but even people waiting in line for bread and water or buying vegetables at the market were not safe from mortars and shells that could be lobbed into almost every part of Sarajevo.



Hillside artillery position below hotel and its view of Sarajevo

An island though it was, there was one strip of land connecting Sarajevo with the rest of Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak) territory. The UN had taken control of the airport early in the conflict, and they alone controlled passage in, out and through. There are reports that have surfaced that when a Sarajevoan would try to escape via running across the airfield, UN soldiers would train spotlights on them, allowing Serb snipers an easy target. The only things allowed to pass through the airport were UN personnel and humanitarian aid.



Tunnel dug underneath Sarajevo International Airport to transport goods and personnel in and out of the city

Sarajevoans are smart and determined people, and a group of them came up with a classic idea to get around, or rather underneath, this airport dilemma: they dug a tunnel. Starting at either side of the runways, teams of men dug towards each other underneath the landing strips and met in the middle. This corridor, designed to get the wounded out and supplies in, soon became a toll road of the black market. It seems that wherever there are people suffering and in need, someone will show up to profit from their strife. The tunnel was also used as a passageway for dignitaries like Bosnia/Herzegovina's president to gain access to the besieged city. The tunnel stayed open and operational for most of the war, despite shelling attacks.

Sarajevo has been working hard to wipe away the stagnant decay the war brought to its land. Buildings whose walls had been destroyed now wear patches or wait to be torn down. Unfortunately, Bosnia has not had the success that Croatia has enjoyed of increased tourism since the fighting ceased. Thus, there is little

foreign investment to help with rebuilding, and many citizens struggle still with unemployment, poverty, and a bleak vision of the future. Though some businesses seek to hide the scars with facades and corrugated panels, one only needs to take a step back to see the history.

On July 11th, we headed out early to Srebrenica, where multiple genocidal events took place ten years earlier. Srebrenica was just a small mining town before the war, boasting to tourists its proximity to the mountains for skiing and hiking and its pleasant, quiet nature. It, too, is nestled in a valley with high rolling hills on both sides. It was a peculiar town because unlike ethnically diverse Sarajevo, Srebrenica was a predominantly Muslim town, surrounded by predominantly Serb towns and villages, lying not more than 10km from the Bosnian/Serbian border.

It was obvious to anyone who cared to look that when the war started, Srebrenica, as well as a few other eastern Muslim enclaves, were in great peril and ran the risk of being erased if something wasn't done. The UN decided that its best course of action was to turn Srebrenica into a "safe haven" and to disarm its citizens so that it would pose no threat to the Serbs living in the surrounding areas. This was necessary, as one of the Serbian justifications for their part in the war was to protect Serb civilians from Muslim attacks.

The functional outcome was an isolated, defenseless island protected by foreigners whose only direct orders were to not fire their weapons, to remain neutral, and to stay out of the fighting unless under direct attack. After synthesizing all of the information I have learned about the events surrounding this "safe haven", I believe that this action on the part of the UN was merely a formality. They had no intention of protecting the people, and how could they? They had less than half the force their strategic advisors told them was a necessary minimum and standing orders were to stay out of the way. If Srebrenica, as well as the other eastern Muslim enclaves, fell to the Serbs, the peace deal that was being designed stood a better chance of being accepted and ending the fighting. This end would be far easier than trying to encourage the acceptance of a multi-ethnic state during an ethnically-fueled nationalistic conflict.

A troupe of charter buses met the conference participants



Government buildings still wear their scars

outside the Holiday Inn at 4:30 a.m. Though at first it seemed as if we were all just crowding in to whichever bus was nearest, we were actually sorted by social group: students on one bus, Bosnian government persons on another, professors from the University of Sarajevo all together, etc. The trip took us on narrow winding roads through scenic eastern Bosnia, all of which is part of a political canton named Republika Srpska.

To end the bloodshed, atrocities, and bad press the UN was receiving, a peace plan was finally agreed upon by the Muslims (Bosniaks), Croats and Serbs. Neither side was happy about their end of the deal, but President Clinton's use of NATO airpower without UN support convinced the Serbs that someone out there cared enough to try and stop their advances. The Bosniaks and Croats were basically forced to sign, by the United States, a peace plan that gave 49% of their country to the aggressors of the war.

Needless to say, we are not the most welcome visitors to this region of Bosnia which is still controlled by Serbs. In fact, just weeks before, police found multiple remote-detonation bombs planted at the memorial center we were enroute to. I knew the security detail would be massive. Nothing to fear, right?



A Republika Srpska sign on the way to Srebrenica where multiple genocidal events occurred



To enter the grounds, visitors had to walk past intimidating Republika Srpska Police decked out in their tactical gear.

We went from city to countryside instantly, passing only small residential centers. About three quarters of the way through the trip, we started noticing the security along the road and intersecting streets tighten. Police cars became regular sights on side roads and a policeman was stationed about every 200 meters along the shoulder. We had to pull over about a mile from the memorial center so that the bus could be searched. By the attitude of the officer and his half-hearted attempt to look under our seats, it was obvious he was doing this for our peace of mind rather than for our safety. It was at that point that our police escort began.

All in all, I must have seen about 80 police officers before I ever got off the bus. I almost thought that must be the entire Republika Srpska police force from this area. One step off the bus and that thought dissipated like smoke in the

wind. We pulled into a grassy field serving as bus parking for the event, just across from the abandoned battery factory which had served as the UN base of operations for Srebrenica. Across the way I could see some kind of thick black screen or fence in front of the memorial center along the road. As we approached, I realized it was a line of police officers. The Republika Srpska officers, about seventy all dressed in tactical gear, were arranged in a line shoulder to shoulder along the road out front. They were blocking all entrances except one, forcing the visitors to walk past them in order to enter the grounds.

These police did not seem of the "Serve and Protect" persuasion. They were big, broad, stone-faced men, with eyes glaring at passersby; all together trying to look as intimidating as possible. One must not forget that when things started to break down in Bosnia, the Bosnian Serbs in the police forces were some of the first to stop showing up for work, start hoarding weapons, and even rob, rape and murder civilians. Some of these very police officers may have actually been involved in the atrocities mourners here were coming to bear witness to.

We had just enough time to stretch our legs before we were shepherded on to smaller buses and whisked up a hillside to the most recently discovered mass grave, not 500m from the memorial center. This grave, as with approximately 75% of the graves found in Bosnia so far, was a secondary grave. A secondary grave is a grave containing artifacts and remains that had been previously buried elsewhere, but were dug up (often by large earth-moving machines) and reburied. This had been done to conceal the location of the

remains, thus concealing the crimes. Fortunately, stock satellite photos can be scrutinized for discrepancies in the surface soil, revealing potential burial sites.

Words can not do justice to the experience of peering into a mass grave. It is a jumbled chaos of clothes and bones, but parts of it retain a bit of humanity, making it even harder to look at. I was totally speechless while in its presence, but there was nothing to say. The state of the remains said it all. Mixed up and contorted piles of bones, some still resembling whole bodies, wearing bullet holes and flagging tape. One spine wore a brace designed to correct the spinal condition scoliosis. That spine, as near as my amateur archaeologist eyes could approximate, was of a person no older than fourteen.

The clothing in the grave seemed to be mixed in with the earth and disassociated from many of the remains. Clothing is the main evidence used in the identification process. Clothing is cleaned, photographed and shown to those who have still not found the remains of their missing. If articles are identified, the remains associated with those clothes have DNA extracted and compared with the suspected family member to verify the identification.

Something seemed amiss here at the grave site, and not just what lay before me. It seemed as if the grave was more of an attraction, like a freak show with pay admission, than it did a solemn memorial. Photographers abounded, some shooting the grave as I was, while many others took pictures of the crowd. A video camera was permanently mounted at one end of the grave, catching the best shots of sorrow, anger and disgust for the news. I found out later that we, the spectators, actually were the show. Another student at the conference told me he saw my "unmistakable head of hair" on Bosnian TV that day. I hope I looked quite infuriated, as it irritated me to no end that we were apparently worth more camera time than the dead.

Sensing that this place was far more important than it was being made out to be, I asked one of the ICMP (International Commission of Missing Persons) workers who looked a few steps up on the organizational food chain if I could take some dirt from the wall of the grave. He was surprised, but quickly gave me permission as well as an evidence bag to put it in. The soil was thick with clay and flat stones. Failing a digging tool, I clawed into the moist earth with my bare hand, finding it much tougher than I had expected. I can't explain why, but possessing that small amount of fill humbled me and pulled at the corners of my eyes. I felt so small, so powerless, and in a sense so close to those who were buried here. The last thing I was going to do, though, was give those vultures their 20 second clip of a young man breaking down at the side of the grave.

I returned to the other side and stopped next to Dr. Young. "Is there anything specific you want shots of, Kathleen?"

"The shoes. Make sure you get pictures of their shoes." Those ended up being some of the most powerful pictures I took there at the site.

Everyone in our group was silent on the walk back to the shuttle buses. Nothing seemed appropriate to talk about in the somber state we were in. On the bus a few people whispered in hushed tones, explaining the background of what they had just seen to one another. A couple was speaking at a normal volume about something trivial which I do not recall. No one spoke of the grave until the dirt had worn from their shoes and the shock faded from their eyes.

Upon returning to the grounds of the UN base, all conference participants were herded into one of the warehouses, filled with rows of chairs facing a podium on an elevated stage. University of



Dr. Young confronting a former member of the Bosnian-Serb paramilitary force, asking him how he felt about being there on this day. His reply, "I have nothing to say."



Mass grave with ICMP workers inside and visitors above



A mass grave excavation near Srebrenica

Sarajevo professors, religious leaders, political figures, and scholars came before us one at a time. They spoke, through an interpreter, about questions that still needed answers, problems needing solutions, and changes that needed to be made. This was a very slow process; every sentence being translated before the speaker went on. The final speaker was Dr. Cekic, the central figurehead of the conference. He had written a 12 page speech on the specific events of Srebrenica, and in order to finish it he did not wait for the English translation.

I tried to be polite and wait for him to finish, but his speech was just too long, and failing a translated script, I found myself nodding off. I got up, took a few pictures of the crowd, and moved to the

back of the room. I found one of the conference organizers and asked for directions to the lavatory. Just outside the warehouse I ran into Kathleen heading the other direction. We talked for a moment and she led me to an abandoned office building around the corner where she thought the facilities were. Stepping in over the broken door frame, I questioned my safety in this place. The floor was littered with shattered glass, trash and moss growing from the cracks in the walls. I thought to myself, "This is about as dead as a building can look."

"I don't think this is where I came in," Kathleen told me, trying to coax me away from the stairs leading up into the building. I doubted the conference would have us use the facilities in such an unsafe place, but more than anything I wanted to venture inside, upstairs, everywhere, to see what secrets this place had to offer.

We left that structure and Kathleen spied the correct building. I went inside and found a line outside the lavatory, so I headed up the stairs to the next floor. The second floor had offices set up with phones, faxes and copiers. I wondered, "How far up *can* I go?" Two flights of stairs later, I was on the top floor, apparently alone. All of the offices were set up as conference rooms, bottles of water neatly arranged in the center of long tables. I used the empty lavatory there, and then ventured back down to explore the lower floors. The third floor was much the same as the fourth, but the second floor contained some interesting art. It was obvious that memorials here were common, as many of the prints on the wall had various dates. I snapped some photos, then left to get back to the more interesting sites.



Poster: Srebrenica / Potocari / 2003

Inside the dilapidated walls of the condemned building, a chill musty breeze passed through the broken windows and out the other side. Natural light illuminated most of the space, making me feel at least a bit more secure about my surroundings. Moving between floors and past blown out windows, I was afraid the hundreds of police and security just outside would burst in at any moment and escort me out. My fears receded with each passing moment. It seemed to me that an ID badge and a camera gave me immunity beyond anything I had expected. I didn't catch so much as a glance from the copious law enforcement and security who surely noticed a young man moving through these condemned buildings.

As I turned a corner into a back room, which had been painted white but was slowly disintegrating, I saw images I remembered from documentaries I had watched about the massacre. On the walls all around the room, emblems from different UN deployed platoons stationed here in Potocari were painted. All the family names of the troops from each unit were listed along with their dates of deployment.



***Abandoned UN headquarters at Srebrenica,
previously a battery factory***

In another, smaller room, I found a most curious painting. On the left side, a peaceful, scenic village lay on lush rolling hills. As one panned to the right, a woman came into view, lying naked on her side under the blue sky. She was lying in a pool of blood that ran away from her to the right and transfigured into a serpent head, fangs bared in the direction of the UN insignias.

Peering out the second story window, I noticed the hillside of the memorial center was losing its green, filling with spectators and mourners. "Shit," I said to myself, "How am I ever going to find my colleagues?" I flew down the rotting staircase and out the entryway towards the memorial center. Long lines of Republika Srpska police directed me all the way around the front of the

memorial without saying a single word to me. Their sinister stares were enough to keep my questions inside.



***Security entourage for dignitaries
in attendance***

I made it to the entrance, overflowing with spectators. Holding my camera above my head, I forced myself through the crowd in the direction the people were looking. I could not see where I was going, nor could I detect the location of the speaker who was addressing the crowd through the PA system to my right. I just moved, my instinct guiding me, until I found myself only four meters behind the speaker's podium. I would have liked to get closer so that I could actually see the face of the speaker, but a large secret service agent was adamant about my staying where I was.

Balancing on a small ledge encircling the fountain to my left, I could see over the security in front of me. Beyond the podium, a sea of dignitaries stood on the other side of the only open space left on the grounds. I recognized several faces, but only two names were certain for me: former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs (1994-96) and

chief negotiator of the Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia in 1995 and current president of the World Bank Paul Wolfowitz. Needless to say, their security entourage was numerous and stone-faced; clear wires dangling from every left ear for 10 meters.

Above the foreign and local dignitaries, a myriad of news media corporations had their teams of cameramen set up on a platform, looming over the proceedings like a storm cloud. Speeches were given, most of which were political rhetoric about how horrible the tragedy was and how they pledge that their governments would make finding those responsible a top priority. To me, though, any talk of "never again" means nothing, for speeches just like them came after the Holocaust, after the Khmer Rouge, after Iraq, and after Rwanda. We are no closer now to committing to fight for foreigners without our interests at stake than we were in 1939.

After the political speeches ended, imams from across the globe joined together in a benediction and prayer in both Bosnian and Arabic. Though I could understand nothing, it was very calming to listen to. I imagined talk of peace and love, both for the living as well as the dead. Afterwards, the Muslims in the audience joined the imams in their traditional prayer. All of a sudden, half of the people around me dropped to their knees in unison, eyes closed, palms facing the sky. It was at



***Muslim men praying
at Srebrenica
Memorial Ceremony***

that moment that I detected a most curious sound. As if the air just above the ground had become a steady storm, the sound of rolling thunder swept through the audience. Unsettling as it was, there was a cool peace accompanying the near-constant hum. I turned to Kathleen, whom I had found when the imams began their address, and asked, "Do you hear that sound? What is it?"



Imams from across the globe joined together in a benediction and prayer.

"That is the sound of people praying," was her reply. The sound swelled and receded, moving in and out like the breath of a slumbering giant, interrupted by the standing and kneeling all at once of those in prayer. I felt like an intruder, standing awkwardly amidst all of these Muslim men praying and crying. "Who am I to be here?" I asked myself again. Kathleen's hand found my shoulder and her motherly smile took my doubts away. "I am here because so many are not. I am here so that I can be changed and I can carry that change with me back to the United States, where the cost of war is scarcely understood in terms other than money."

The prayers ended and the massive crowd of mourners began to leave the premises. I got caught in the flow and lost track of Kathleen. I made it out to the road, where the police were now standing around paying little attention to the spectators, when I overheard talk of the coffins.

This ceremony was not only a commemoration of the genocide here ten years ago; it was also a burial ceremony for over 650 recently

identified victims. I didn't realize that the coffins were on display, likely because they were further beyond the crowd than the podium, which was as far as I had gone. I returned to the memorial center; now mostly empty, to document the final movement in what has been a long journey for these beautiful people I would never meet.



650 Coffins

I reached the site, and what a sight it was. 650 sounds like a lot, but to see 650 green coffins stretching out before you, well, it takes on a whole new gravity. Green was chosen as the color for the cloth covers because of its significance in Islamic culture. The overwhelming majority of the victims being buried in this cemetery had been Muslim. Each coffin was numbered and labeled with the name and lifespan of its occupant.

Two men, dressed in blue suits and pure white gloves, approached the first coffin. They examined the label, spoke briefly to one another, then lifted it up and handed it to people in the gathering crowd. The people seemed to know what was going on; the coffins began to

travel towards the other end of the memorial site, where a large cemetery awaited them.

Watching this... seeing these random people step up to take the coffins of strangers upon their shoulders; I just couldn't take pictures anymore. It wasn't right. I put my lens cap on, shouldered my camera, and walked over to the men in suits. They hoisted a coffin into the air and put it in my waiting hands. I tried to move along

with the remains, but another volunteer advised me to stay in one place so we could create a chain by which to pass the coffins more efficiently.

I stayed near the blue-suited men, following their movements down the rows of coffins, passing one after another down the tunnel of hands waiting to accept them. Some people came in line just to touch, to connect if only for a moment, with the dead. Others, like me, were there to bear the weight.

I stopped to shoot a few pictures of the coffins heading down between the rows of hands, catching a grimace from the man next to me. I put my camera away, afraid I had offended him, and continued to pass the coffins along. He leaned over to me between loads and told me something I could not believe and will never forget.

"You are a good person. I can see it in your eyes. Thank you for being here." I was dumbfounded. I couldn't respond. How would I respond? I was there more by chance and fate than by choice, though it was still my choice. He was sincere and his words heartfelt. I almost cried right there.

"This is the absolute least I could do. After all these wonderful people have seen..." I trailed off, unable to respond to this, the heaviest compliment I could ever receive. A smile swept across my face, as now I felt that I was part of something, part of this service, working together with others to pay what little homage we could manage.

Others around me ended the silence and we began to talk as we worked. The man to my left was from Turkey, and had traveled all this way to be a part of this commemoration. He came to love all of these Muslims as brothers and sisters, seeing the tragedy here as an attack on people simply because of their religion. In fact, most of those around me were not Bosnians. They had come from all over in solidarity with the Muslim cause. They spoke to me of the Koran and the teachings of love and peace Muhammad brought to his people.

The Turkish man offered to take a picture of me carrying the coffins, which I was extremely grateful for. In all my travels on this trip, those photos ended up being the majority of pictures documenting the fact that I was there. As we moved the coffins, I realized how incredibly fortunate I was to be there and to experience this event, not just visually and emotionally, but also physically. Carrying the coffins with my own hands, I was able to truly experience them in all their dimensions. Some, as one might expect, were heavy; the weight of a body clearly evident. Others were surprisingly light, as if they were nearly empty. This fact reminded me how little of a person might be recovered and identified due to unearthing and reburial, a process many mass graves in Bosnia endured.



Coffins are passed one at a time through rows of volunteers.



Andrew was given the honor of helping to carry the caskets.

As I write this now, I remember how beautiful those men I met were, and how much I must have touched their hearts as they touched mine. I would have stayed moving coffins all day until it was done. Had I known, I would have moved to the other end of the memorial to dig the graves or fill them back in. Anything I could do for these fantastic people and for their memory... Unfortunately, I had arrived by bus and was scheduled to leave the same way. I thanked those around me for their

love and acceptance of a non-Muslim, an American, in their midst, and headed to my meeting area.

Of course, I made it back to the bus just in time to wait half an hour for the rest of our group to return. Had it been any longer, I would have gone back, but in that short amount of time there would be nothing I could really do. Kathleen got back just after I did, so we talked and I showed her my pictures. Maybe ten minutes later we noticed a small crowd of reporters huddled around a few men.

As we approached the crowd, I tried to peer through the circle of reporters to see who was at its center. Richard Holbrooke and U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Pierre-Richard Prosper were giving short speeches about the event and about the United States' position towards the perpetrators still at large.

The ambassador declared that the United States would make finding Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic a priority as part of the "war on terror." After they finished, they opened it up for questions from the audience. Kathleen, who had been practicing asking hard questions recently, decided to start out with a big one.

She stepped forward and asked Mr. Holbrooke if he felt it necessary to apologize for the way that the Dayton Peace Accords divided the country and legitimized the ethnic cleansing of what is now Republika Srpska. His face became contorted as he realized the gravity and personal implications of what she was asking, and he almost took a step back, trying to work out the least politically damaging response he could manage.



U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Pierre-Richard Prosper and former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke.

He told her it was fine with him if she wanted to be at Srebrenica ten years ago. He also said that there was nothing to apologize for, as the **Dayton Accords**, while not perfect, were the best and only solution that both sides would agree to. He did say that he believed Republika Srpska to be an illegal entity that should be dismantled and reintegrated into a complete, unilateral Bosnia. The responsibility to make this change, he contended, lies with the Bosnians themselves and not with the international community. I asked my Bosnian tour guide if he thought the democracy was what holds the country together, and he replied, "Do you see all the foreign military on the streets? If they were to leave, we would have war within days. To change, we need the world's help."

Dayton Accords

The Dayton Peace Accords were signed in November, 1995, in Dayton, Ohio, ending the war. The Dayton agreement is sometimes considered to have cemented "ethnic cleansing" because it left 44 percent of the population of Bosnia with just 25 percent of the land. Bosnia was divided into "ethnic kantons."

I was irritated by Holbrooke's assertion that this was a Bosnian problem that Bosnians were responsible for dealing with. Kathleen and I discussed possible future scenarios for Bosnia as we waited for the rest of the conference participants to return. The future is uncertain here. With more international investment in local infrastructure, things may improve for the greatly unemployed population, at least financially. Should the status quo carry on and the government of Bosnia/Herzegovina continue to cycle officials from one position to the next, things are unlikely to change significantly. In fact, violence may return to the region, as the blood of the past has yet to be washed away. Three different school systems, one for each ethnicity, teach three different histories, none of which reflects the multi-ethnic Bosnia that once existed in peace. The fighting is over, but there is no peace here. Peace is not the absence of war, but the presence of justice, understanding, and compassion.



Finally at rest. In Muslim culture, burial is very important for the families of the deceased. Their families now have a precise location to pray and to grieve. Their long wait is over.