

ASTA MARIA ZINBO

USA

International Commission on Missing Persons office Sarajevo

Lecturer in IUC, Dubrovnik 2004, 2005 & 2006

Asta Maria Zinbo

SURVIVING RELATIVES SPEAK OUT - ICMP PARTICIPATION IN THE COURSE WAR CRIMES, GENOCIDE AND MEMORIES

Family members of an estimated 20,000 missing persons in the former Yugoslavia still have no information about the fate and whereabouts of their missing loved ones and live each day painfully searching for facts and closure to this difficult chapter of their lives. The International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) is an international organization that was created in 1996, following the G-7 Summit, in Lyon, France, to address the issue of persons missing as a result of the different conflicts relevant to the countries and regions of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s.

ICMP endeavors to secure the co-operation of Governments and other authorities in locating and identifying persons missing as a result of armed conflicts, other hostilities or violations of human rights and to assist them in doing so. ICMP also supports the work of other organizations in their efforts, encourages public involvement in its activities and contributes to the development of appropriate expressions of commemoration and tribute to the missing.

One large part of ICMP's activities includes using science in the service of truth and justice. ICMP's Forensic Science Department (FSD) has the primary responsibility within ICMP for developing, implementing and managing the technical process of assisting governments in exhumations, examinations and identifications of persons missing as a result of violent conflicts. The development of high capacity DNA testing capability has contributed to 10,776 DNA match reports¹ for separate individuals indicating identity

based on analysis of submitted bone samples from exhumed mortal remains and blood samples from surviving relatives.

Another important aspect of ICMP's activities includes encouraging public involvement and civil society initiatives. ICMP works with an extensive regional network of more than 100 Associations of Missing Persons to help them raise awareness of the issue and to increase the Association members' civic initiative and capacity to advocate for "missing persons" as a human rights issue. These activities focus on: empowerment, to ensure that associations of families of missing persons are strong, independent and fully engaged in clarifying the fate of their missing relatives. This is implemented through providing project grants to family associations, as well as training and technical assistance. A priority has been placed on networking, specifically to engage family associations in effective regional networks that address the specific rights and needs of family members with missing relatives; implemented through conferences, meetings, and publications. This has included organizing a series of annual regional conferences since 1998.

Raising public awareness in order to promote improved understanding of the missing persons issue and the situation of surviving family members is also an important priority. ICMP seeks to bring attention to the issue through activities addressing the legal, social, and economic rights of family members of the missing, as well as emphasizing that the missing persons issue is a human rights issue.

Growing out of the emphasis on regional networking, in recent years a special priority has been placed on promoting mutual understanding. This includes fostering a spirit of acknowledgment and a process of dealing with the past by members of associations of families of missing persons regarding the disappearance of their loved ones. It also seeks to explore the

notion of the violent conflicts that they themselves survived, as well as to encourage dialogue on aspects of transitional justice.

Since 2004, ICMP has participated in the "War Crimes, Genocide and Memories" course offered each Spring by the Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies, University of Sarajevo, the European Regional Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democracy in Southeast Europe/ERMA held at the Inter University Center in Dubrovnik, Croatia. Reasons for participation include a common desire of both the organizers and ICMP to encourage survivors groups to speak out on their own behalf about their experiences in order to raise public awareness and to promote mutual understanding, in their overall quest to achieve truth and justice.

ICMP's participation has included organizing panel discussions of representatives of associations of families of missing persons and exhibitions open not only to the course participants, but also to the local residents of Dubrovnik and the wider public.

For the first year in 2004, ICMP organized a showing of the "Voices of the Missing" audio visual portrait of members of Associations of Families of Missing Persons created by Bosnian photographer Haris Memija. In its efforts to raise public awareness and communicate the situation of family members of the missing, ICMP engaged the photographer to travel to meet with association representatives across BiH to document their stories. Based on these field visits, the exhibition of 30 large size portraits and 10 audio taped statements of Bosniak, Croatian, and Serbian families was presented at the opening in February 2002, and shown again on 30 August 2002 and in fall, 2003 in Brugges. The exhibition opened at the Rupe Ethnographic Museum in Dubrovnik, Croatia on 10 May 2004.

Kada Hotić, of the Association of Citizens "Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclaves" in Sarajevo, Smilja Mitrović, of the Association

of Families of Captured and Fallen Soldiers and Civilians RS - Municipal Organization in Bijeljina, Marija Luksić, of the Association of Croatian Civilian Victims of the Homeland War of Croatia, Dubrovnik-Neretva Canton, and Munevera Avdić, of Association of Families of Dead and Missing Persons "Vrbanja" Kotor Varoš in Travnik participated in the exhibition and the panel discussion on the topic of "The Missing Persons Issue in the Former Yugoslavia" during the course.

In 2005, ICMP organized an exhibition entitled "Remembering War Crimes in Prijedor 1992, Bosnia & Hercegovina: Exhumations, Identifications and Burials" by photographer Samir Sinanović at the Otok Gallery, Art Workshop Lazareti in Dubrovnik, Croatia. Sinanović was born in Sanski Most and has been working as a photographer for the last ten years. During the 1992-1995 war, approximately 3,278 non-Serb citizens were killed or went missing from the Prijedor area. As of 2005, approximately 1,900 individual remains had been exhumed, but hundreds of bodies were still unidentified. Surviving family members were still seeking the fate of more than 1,300 persons at the time.

During the course in May, 2005 ICMP organized a discussion on the theme "Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views: Prijedor, Bosnia and Hercegovina, 1992". ICMP has worked closely with the Associations "Izvor" and "Bridges of Friendship" from Prijedor over the years. The guests included members of the Association "Izvor," Nusreta Sivac, Zilhad Ćustić, and Fikret Bačić who are survivors of events in Prijedor. Nusreta Sivac was imprisoned at the Omarska prison camp in 1992 and provided testimony in The Hague several times; she is now a peace activist with the NGO "From Heart to Peace;" Zilhad Ćustić, who lost a large number of relatives, neighbors and friends, was tortured and witnessed many events while detained in the Omarska, Manjača and Batković camps; and Fikret Bačić lived and worked in Prijedor until 1992, when he lost

33 close members of his family, including his wife and two children, whose bodies have still not been found.

"I will tell you what was happening in the villages around Prijedor. On 22 July 1992, as they say [chethnic] cleansing started. They came to my village. They gathered all of the adult men, and those who were not adults but who looked older. Some of them they shot there in the village and some they took to camps. They executed seven pairs of brothers by firing squad in front of the school. Only women and children were left in the village, after all of the men were taken away. On 25 July 1992 they started with cleansing of the remaining citizens. During those events they executed 33 members of my family, my wife, children, mother and other relatives. They executed three more families in my village. Those executions were committed by our neighbors from Serbian villages... I have come back to Prijedor. I live in my house and on a daily basis I meet those persons." Excerpt from Fikret Bačić's remarks.

"Our day would start with counting the dead bodies in front of the 'white house'. So, in a low voice we women would tell each other and check the number that each of us counted ...of bodies of persons who were massacred during the night or killed. In the evening, after we completed our duties, we would go back to the rooms where we spent the nights and we would find those rooms covered in blood, the floor and walls covered by blood, and very often we would find devices that were used for the torture during the interrogations. Of course we couldn't lie there, we had to wipe away that blood, and also there were devices for torture especially made for that occasion. Some kind of iron made sticks, with some kind of balls, wrapped with wire, then wooden sticks and rubber truncheons, I have never seen that before. Some stick had engraved 4 S² on it. Very often we would find those devices covered by blood when we would come back to that room. The only thing I could wish

for myself was to be killed by a bullet, but that was the rarest way to die in the camp." Excerpt from Nusreta Sivac's presentation.

During the discussion participants asked whether the guests could forgive what had happened to them and if they wanted revenge. Fikret Bačić explained, "I wanted to say something about forgiving and forgetting. Can you forget something when I know that my son would be sitting here today in a group like this one at university, the same as my daughter and to forgive? My son was born in 1979 and my daughter was born in 1986. My daughter was six and my son was 11 when they were killed, there is no forgiveness or oblivion. And to answer the question related to revenge. It is not a problem to go and to take a pistol and kill one or two men, but there was a group of 40-50 persons who committed this crime, and I wouldn't be able to kill them all. That's one thing, and another, if I would do something like that I would be same kind of criminals as they are."

Nusreta Sivac stated "responsibility is individual, but in Prijedor and elsewhere where horrible crimes have been committed, the structures of the authorities were involved. Government structures were the ones that organized and supported those crimes; it wasn't individuals who just became outlaws. The authorities organized it, and military and civilian structures were given the tasks. There are no healthy forces in Prijedor, only some individuals who with some shame can say 'yes it happened really, we are ashamed', but you will never hear about that at public gatherings when facing the past is discussed as a topic. You will not hear authorities say 'it really happened, we are ashamed.' Something like that wouldn't happen."

As a part of the "War Crimes, Genocide and Memories" course in 2006, ICMP and the Sarajevo Ars Aevi Center of Contemporary Art presented a series of posters on the theme "Identify - Srebrenica:

Podrinje Identification Project" at the Art workshop Lazareti, Otok Gallery, in Dubrovnik from 8 -14 May 2006. The posters, created by the Sarajevo-based creative team "Ideologija" were designed to raise awareness about the missing persons issue. They feature personal items found in Srebrenica-related mass grave sites from ICMP's Podrinje Identification Project facility in Tuzla.

Originally marking the tenth anniversary of the fall of Srebrenica in July, 2005, the "Identify" appeal posters were placed on billboards and illuminated advertisement boards in BiH. Thousands of post-cards with this message were distributed across the country and abroad. The selection of clothing from the books of photographs at ICMP's Podrinje Identification Project is focused on garments with familiar labels of famous European and world manufacturers, helping to create a feeling of empathy towards the victims.

During the May, 2006 course, ICMP organized a panel discussion on "Fighting for Truth and Justice: the Work of Srebrenica Women." Panelists included Šehida Abdurahmanović of the Association of Citizens "Women of Srebrenica" in Tuzla; Aisa Omerović of the Association Srebrenica Mothers in Srebrenica; Kada Hotić of the Association of citizens "Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclaves" in Sarajevo. Marko Jurišić and Amor Mašović participated as members of the collegium of Directors of the BiH Missing Persons Institute and formerly Co-Presidents of the Federation Government Commission on Missing Persons in BiH.

As of May, 2006, ICMP had collected 20,693 blood samples representing 7,789 individual missing persons from Srebrenica. Of 5,215 DNA profiles from bone samples of exhumed remains, ICMP produced 5,361 DNA reports representing 3,522 individuals from Srebrenica. In addition, ICMP generated 1,684 reports re-associating disassociated remains from secondary mass graves. At that time, 2,480 cases had been identified and closed, and 2,032 peo-

ple had been buried³, 1,885 of them at the Srebrenica Potočari memorial and cemetery. On 11 July 2006 an additional 489 people were identified and buried in Potočari, along with 16 close relatives of those victims who were killed in other events during the 1992-1995 war in BiH.

Unlike previous years, the 2006 panel included both victims - survivors groups representatives as well as relevant government representatives, and the showing of two short documentary films about Srebrenica. The multi-sector representatives and mediums stimulated strong reactions from the course participants.

Aisa Omerović is a member of the Association of Citizens Srebrenica Mothers, based in Srebrenica. Her two sons went missing in 1995 during the fall of Srebrenica along with 42 other relatives. Kada Hotić is Vice President of the association Mothers of Srebrenica and Žepa Enclaves⁴. She lost her husband during the fall of Srebrenica in July, 1995. He was identified by DNA in 2001 and buried in Potočari. She is still seeking her only son Samir. Kada lives in Vogošća, outside of Sarajevo, where she has been an active member of the association since its establishment. Šehida Abdurahmanović lost her husband, two brothers and many other relatives in Srebrenica. After fall of Srebrenica she lived in Tuzla. She returned to Srebrenica in 2002 and now is living in her brother's house, because her apartment was totally destroyed and has not been reconstructed. She is an active member of the association Women of Srebrenica⁵ based in Tuzla.

Kada Hotić emphasized that the victims' main goal is to find missing persons, to know their fate, to bury them, and to talk about what happened so that the world can know the truth - as part of the justice that victims deserve. "My work in the association is a way to fill the emptiness in my life, without the families we would not have the memorial and cemetery." Following the viewing of the

films Šehida Abdurahmanović added "this is the life of all of us. Through this life we are fighting for justice and truth. We gave ourselves that task, to continue to fight as long as we are alive. Many mothers didn't live to bury their children. We are here to fight for them, for our loved ones, to prove what happened to the world."

Participants asked about the issue of denial and what elements contribute to reducing it. Representatives of the government commission on missing persons stressed that the ICTY had made an important contribution, with the facts revealed during trials and the confessions in some cases, as well as the many exhumations of mass graves conducted by ICTY teams and government commissions on missing persons. The report of the Republika Srpska Government Commission For Investigation of the Events in and Around Srebrenica Between 10th and 19th July 1995 also made a contribution to reducing denial as an official acknowledgement of events in Srebrenica, even though it did not directly state that genocide was committed. Denial still exists but each identification contributes to reducing it.

War crimes, genocide and memories are still taboo topics in many circles. Many people prefer to sweep these events under the carpet for the sake of the future. This is a mistake. Participating in this course brings together both theory and practice. Hearing and publicizing first-hand experiences of those who lived through such events can be a small but important step in addressing years of indoctrination of ordinary people with hate and lies. Coupled with politicization and unacceptable attempts to equalize crimes, it makes a dangerous potion for society. Ironically at times, victims-survivors are the strongest advocates for truth, justice, and mutual tolerance in the interest of a better life and preventing anyone from having to live through such horrors again, regardless of their religious, national, ethnic background. It is hoped that interactions fostered during ICMP's participation in this course on War Crimes,

Genocide and Memories will have a constructive impact on future leaders and human rights activists of the former Yugoslavia and beyond.

Notes

1 As of 1 December 2006. See <http://www.ic-mp.org> for regular DNA tracking updates.

2 Serbian national symbol, which in local language stands for "only unity saves the Serbs."

3 As of 1 December 2006 a total of 2,808 cases of Srebrenica victims had been closed and 2,528 people had been buried.

4 See <http://www.srebrenica-zepa.ba>

5 See <http://www.srebrenica.ba>