

Srebrenica continues to haunt the Netherlands

Impressions of a mass burial

By Edwin F. Giltay | Translated by Caspar ten Dam

Over 20,000 people from near and far travelled to the Bosnian mountain town of Srebrenica to attend this year's genocide commemoration. Every July 11th, bodies found and identified over the past year, are buried. This year there are 71: The remains of people massacred after the enclave was overrun by Serbian troops in 1995. Author Edwin Giltay and journalist / interpreter Naida Ribić were present at the ceremony.

Countless times I have heard and read about what happened here: The fall of the town and the murder of over 8,000 men and boys. I know the facts; I know of the unfathomable genocide. And yet I cannot refrain from crying with the mourning crowd. The sorrow is too deep – it overwhelms us all.

Of course, in the bright sunlight and the temperature rising to 95 degrees, no one is quite at ease. But it's the sadness of the genocide; this inhumane act, that affects us deeply.

On top of that, I am ashamed of my nationality. After all, it was the Dutch military that disarmed the Bosniaks in Srebrenica and promised to protect them. Nevertheless, when the Serbs overran the enclave, my compatriots threw them to the mercy of their arch-enemies, without a second thought. The Dutch didn't fire a single shot. The defence lines, dug out by the Bosniaks, were handed over to Serbian troops just like that. During the commemoration, several youngsters point this out to me most poignantly, in fluent English.

Still, on their own account they put things in perspective: 'The Serbs are much worse. They will never admit their mistakes, while many Dutch do.'

The teens are right. Two weeks prior to this ceremony, the Court of Appeal in The Hague stated in a historic ruling that the Netherlands is partly responsible for the death of about 300 Bosniaks who were deported from the area on July 13, 1995. Countries are no longer able to hide behind collective responsibility of the United Nations. Dutchbat, the Dutch UN battalion, was well aware the Bosniaks were doomed and they ought to have provided protection – this they had promised, the judge said in court. Among the attendees were thirty widows.

Prior to court proceedings, Munira Subašić, President of the Mothers of Srebrenica, had given me a white lapel pin symbolizing the suffering. At the Srebrenica cemetery, I wear it on my chest.

As I do not speak Bosnian, I set myself to filming Naida, who interviews a large number of surviving relatives at the vast burial grounds. One woman wears a T-shirt, picturing her deceased husband. She discloses both her husband and son have been murdered. She doesn't have a single picture of her beloved son. The woman bursts out in tears – Naida consoles her spontaneously. In front of the camera they embrace.

Thousands and thousands of white marble headstones: I nearly curse at the abundance of injustice. But then I hear the Islamic prayer, calling out to all – in an

almost magical vein: We are all here as one. This must never be forgotten, in order for it to never happen again.

It seems as if the universal thought of 'never again' hovers over the pilgrims, assembled to pay respect to the victims. The sky seems electrified with this one wish.

In order to remember, it is vital to know exactly what happened here. Finding the truth is essential. It may seem self-evident, but unfortunately it isn't – not when Srebrenica is concerned.

The Serbs tried their utmost to conceal the genocide. With bulldozers, they dug up existing mass graves of the Bosniaks they had executed, to relocate the bodies far away in secret. They also moved swaths of human remains to remote places, and put land mines on top. Hence, 22 years on, remains of many victims have never been found.

The 71 caskets are small. Of several victims, only a single bone fragment has been identified; now laid in nearly empty caskets. A thousand victims may never be found again. In case there are no surviving family members, DNA identification is impossible at any rate.

A giant truck, covered with the Bosnian flag, transported the caskets from the Visoko mortuary to Srebrenica. One of the stops was Sarajevo, on July 9th. I saw women crying in the streets. Hundreds of people paid their respect when the truck stopped in front of the Presidency Building, near the memorial for 1,500 children killed during the siege of the city.

Apart from the Serbs, the Dutch also keep evidence of war crimes under wraps. Think: The infamous 'Srebrenica film roll'. In 2014, I wrote a book relating to this affair: *The Cover-up General*. A year after publication, the non-fiction thriller was banned by court order. My freedom of speech was limited as well: I wasn't allowed to talk about its contents anymore or promote the book. However, the Court of Appeal in The Hague overturned the verdict: It found that the accuracy of the book is not in doubt, and it has been reprinted since. The initial verdict was so far-reaching, it would have been impossible for me to even write this very article. It could have cost me 100,000 euro in fines.

The withholding of photos also plays a part in the lawsuit over 200 Dutchbat veterans commenced recently against their former employer. Apart from rehabilitation and compensation for having been equipped with poor weaponry, they demand the pictures and videos they've taken in the days after Srebrenica's fall. It concerns at least eight film rolls, containing sensitive material; such as evidence of war crimes. These were requisitioned by senior officers, and are now held under lock and key – somewhere in military intelligence vaults.

Many former Dutchbat soldiers feel betrayed by the superpowers for not having used air support in Srebrenica. Retired Army Colonel Charlef Brantz – at the time superior officer of Dutchbat-commander Karremans – wrote me that both the Minister of Foreign Affairs as well as Dutch NATO representatives were informed about the decision, six weeks before the fall of the enclave. The authorities failed to inform Dutchbat accordingly. In this godforsaken place, our troops were apparently abandoned not only by the superpowers, but by their own top brass as well.

After today's ceremony, Naida and I are invited to the homes of the Srebrenica Mothers. When I mention the veterans' legal proceedings, my compatriots receive some support when it comes to unearthing the photo evidence. Media are also aware of the fact my book will be discussed by the Parliamentary Defence Committee later this year. The country's biggest newspaper, *Dnevni Avaz*, reported about it only this morning.

Of late, Bosnian media have reported on the countless rapes during the civil war. It is tried to break the taboo. A new campaign points out the stigma ought to burden the perpetrators instead of their victims. Women sharing their traumatic experiences are being praised for their courage.

The Mothers of Srebrenica claim some of the Dutchbat veterans also committed rapes. They may not have used force, but all the same it is rumoured they took advantage of women who were scared to death, being coerced by Serbian troops.

The morning after the commemoration, Srebrenica's former mayor, Ćamil Duraković, visits Naida and me at our hotel. As chairman of the memorial organization committee, he has denied access to the burial grounds to anyone who denies the genocide: Even his Serbian successor has to stay away. Duraković considers the measure necessary to safeguard the peace of mind of the survivors who come to bury their loved ones. He stresses there have been no significant incidents this year.

As we leave Srebrenica in the afternoon, I notice the beauty of the landscape. The wooded hills bask in the sunlight. How in God's name has it come to pass these hills should be covered with war graves?

Edwin F. Giltay is author of The Cover-up General, in which he uncovers a scandal within the Dutch military secret service regarding the aftermath of the Srebrenica drama: www.thecoverupgeneral.com

His journey to the 22nd annual commemoration of the genocide was made possible by the SGTRS foundation: www.sgtrs.nl/english

This is a translation of an article published in Dutch on: www.novini.nl/srebrenica-blijft-nederland-achtervolgen-impressie-massabegravenis

The caskets arrive in Srebrenica (© Edwin Giltay)

Naida at the cemetery (© Edwin Giltay)

Naida (left) consoles one of the widows (© Edwin Giltay)