

## **Most Victims Still Nameless**

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Local forensic investigation teams attempt to return victims' bodies to grieving relatives. Perhaps the only thing worse than losing a loved one is to be unsure whether a missing relative is alive or dead.

For a long time after Serb forces overran the Muslim enclave of Srebrenica, women who lost sons, husbands, brothers and fathers in the massacre hoped that their relatives might be in a Serb prison, or hiding somewhere in Serb territory.

Ten years on, however, the women have come to accept that the 8,000 men and boys who went missing in the wake of the July 1995 attack are dead. Now, the women of Srebrenica have one last hope – to find the remains of the missing men.

“My biggest fear is that I will never find my child,” said Sabaheta Fejzic, 49, who lost both her son and her husband in the massacre. “I fear I will never have a grave to visit and that I will never know how they killed him.”

Fejzic, who worked as a manager in Srebrenica's zinc factory, now lives with her mother in Sarajevo and spends her weeks doing housework, cooking, watching soap operas and reading everything about Srebrenica she can find. Her only consolation is to go every weekday to the humble office of the Mothers of Srebrenica in Sarajevo and seek comfort among women who share her fate.

“We give each other the willpower to keep going towards our aim – to find the missing and bury them,” said Fejzic's friend, Zumra Sehomirovic, whose husband Omer is also missing.

Had the men and boys of Srebrenica been left in peace after they were killed, identifying their corpses would not have been so difficult.

After Bosnian Serb troops executed them, they ploughed thousands of the dead into mass graves. But in the weeks and months after the massacres, the Serb forces attempted to conceal their actions from prying international eyes by unearthing the graves and moving the bodies.

The decomposing corpses were heaved by bulldozers from their temporary resting places and dumped into trucks, before being hauled into scores of so-called “secondary graves”.

This cover-up operation was exposed, but it has made it nearly impossible for the survivors of Srebrenica ever to identify the bodies of their loved ones. The bulldozers reduced whole corpses to piles of body parts, which were then reburied in several locations across the Republika Srpska, RS.

But in an extraordinary move, Bosnia's Commission for Missing Persons has pledged to try to put a name to every concealed, shredded and fragmented skeleton found in the graves. Those that are identified before the July 11 anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre will be re-buried at Potocari.

The process is gruesome and distressing. Murat Hurtic, who represents the commission in Tuzla, has opened 68 mass graves. "We live strange lives. Traumatic. But we do it because we have to," he said.

Hurtic takes us to an artificial lake near Petkovici, where hundreds of men were lined up and shot. We are chased off the premises by the security guard, but undeterred Hurtic follows the trail of the dead, who were removed from the lake and taken up a winding mountain track to the remote village of Liplja.

"In this village, three graves contain the shredded remains of more than 1,000 people," he said. "There were about 240 bodies in this first grave. When I came, we found skulls and bones right on the surface – they didn't do a very good job of hiding them. All the graves were located in Bosniak villages that had been completely destroyed, they thought no-one would go back there."

But they are going back now. The man who oversees the search is Amor Masevic, head of the commission.

"Each primary grave has four or five secondary graves, so the bodies became split up," he said. "There are pieces of the same person spread out across different graves all over Bosnia, so we are left with a dilemma: we may only have someone's forearm, and maybe we know whose forearm it is, but we don't have the nerve to say to the family, 'We have found your son'.

"How can you tell a mother you have her son's body when you only have a forearm?"

Masovic sighs, "Unfortunately, death does not wait for us to find the missing. Not a day passes without someone from the enclaves dying before their relatives have been found. We have talked a lot about this, and have reached a consensus that if 50 per cent of a body is found, we tell [the relative]."

Against this background of ethical uncertainty, the remarkable process of "re-associating" and identifying skeletons must proceed. Once the commission has found and exhumed the graves and autopsies have been completed, the remains are handed over to a series of facilities run by the International Commission for Missing Persons, ICMP.

The first of these, the Podrinje Identification Project in Tuzla, is located next to a tunnel dug into hillside. This tunnel stores tens of thousands of body bags from all over Bosnia, collected throughout the war. Most of those from Srebrenica are kept in an annex of vaults. They are piled high, on shelf after shelf. Rows of aluminum trays hold white plastic bags of body parts and brown bags of personal effects.

The shelves are now full, and bags are piled up on the floor. A forklift truck stands ready to lift more. There are 4,000 bags here, divided into three categories. Zlatan Sabanovic, ICMP programme manager in Tuzla, explained, "The first category contain complete, or relatively complete, bodies. The second, a few body parts belonging to one person. The third, mixed body parts – parts belonging to up to ten people in one bag."

A smaller room holds poignant relics from the massacre: personal belongings taken on the "road of death", from Potocari to the execution sites. A silver carriage clock, photographs of children, deutschmarks and Austrian schillings and water bottles.

Once a victim's body parts have been collected together, they are taken to a funeral parlour in the small industrial town of Lukavac, known as the re-association centre. Here, Canadian forensic anthropologist Cheryl Katzmarzyk leads a team dedicated to assembling skeletons.

This is a macabre place, but it is infused with an impressive sense of purpose. First stop is the bone-cleaning area. Here, Meho Islam removes the bones from bags full of mud and grime, rummaging through dirt and sediment to ensure that every part is recovered ("He's particularly good at finding teeth," said Katzmarzyk). Each bone is then washed and carefully stored.

Upstairs is a large room in which the re-association takes place. On tables and stretches of brown paper laid across the floor lie rows of skeletons at various stages of completion. Some are merely small collections of bones, while others are almost fully assembled.

A skull, a forearm, a leg, part of a rib cage – slowly, and painstakingly, Katzmarzyk's team of anthropologists and pathologists set about their work.

"Within this group of bones are at least three people," said Katzmarzyk, doing her rounds. "Here, we have a very young person, probably 16 or less, there, we have a knee, that's all there is."

On the floor is a completed skeleton, "But in this case we have no relative," said Katzmarzyk, "no blood sample. We've had him completed since 2003 and he needs to go home. We desperately need more people to come forward with blood samples. Here on this table, there's another person who's been complete since February 2002, but we have no name for him, and there is no-one to claim him."

The third stage in the process occurs back in Tuzla, in the Identification Coordination Division. At first, the identification project used classic forensic anthropological and pathological methods. Then, in 1998, it began a revolutionary experiment in post-conflict assessment: DNA testing of bone and blood samples to link surviving family members to the remains of the dead.

Initially, samples of body parts were sent abroad to laboratories in America, Poland and the UK. But the practice proved slow and expensive, and the results took months to arrive. So in 2000, the ICMP began its own DNA testing project in Bosnia. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of identifications – there were only seven positive one in 1997, and 20 in 1998, but then 518 in 2002, 490 in 2003 and 534 last year.

Sections of bone arrive at the centre in bags, and are measured, cleaned, put in a glass tubes, and given a bar code and a DNA profile. They are then compared against a database of relatives' blood samples. It is here that matches are made, and families are finally given back their dead.

So far, 7,789 people are estimated to be missing, but Katheryne Bomberger, chief of staff for ICMP in Bosnia, said, "There are more people than that, definitely. I think we will end up with a figure closer to 8,500."

On July 11, 570 identified victims of the Srebrenica massacre will be buried in Potocari. Forty-seven of those to be buried are boys.

Naming these corpses has been a painful and laborious process, but Bomberger still manages to be positive about her work. “Everything we are doing is completely new, and on an enormous scale,” she said. “Having a war crimes tribunal looking at mass graves with a view to prosecution is new. But having a parallel operation looking at mass graves to try to establish truth – and ultimately justice – in a society that craves these things is a voyage into the unknown. What we are doing is unique.”

For Sabaheta Fejzic, Zumra Sehomirovic and thousands of other women from Srebrenica who don't know what became of their missing men folk, this voyage into the unknown may finally offer the peace of mind they have sought for so long.

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