



# Remembering the Srebrenica Genocide on Holocaust Memorial Day

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*On the 26th of January, Giulia was invited to remember the Srebrenica genocide at the Holocaust Memorial Day organized at the Lighthouse in Poole. The main speaker of the day was Henry Schachter who told his story of how he survived the Holocaust as a child. You can read Giulia's fantastic talk below:*

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. On July 1995, more than 8.000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were killed by the Bosnian Serb Army. The massacre of Srebrenica became the symbol of the failure of the international community to protect the civilian population. Why is it important to keep talking about Srebrenica? Today I would like to propose some answers to this question.

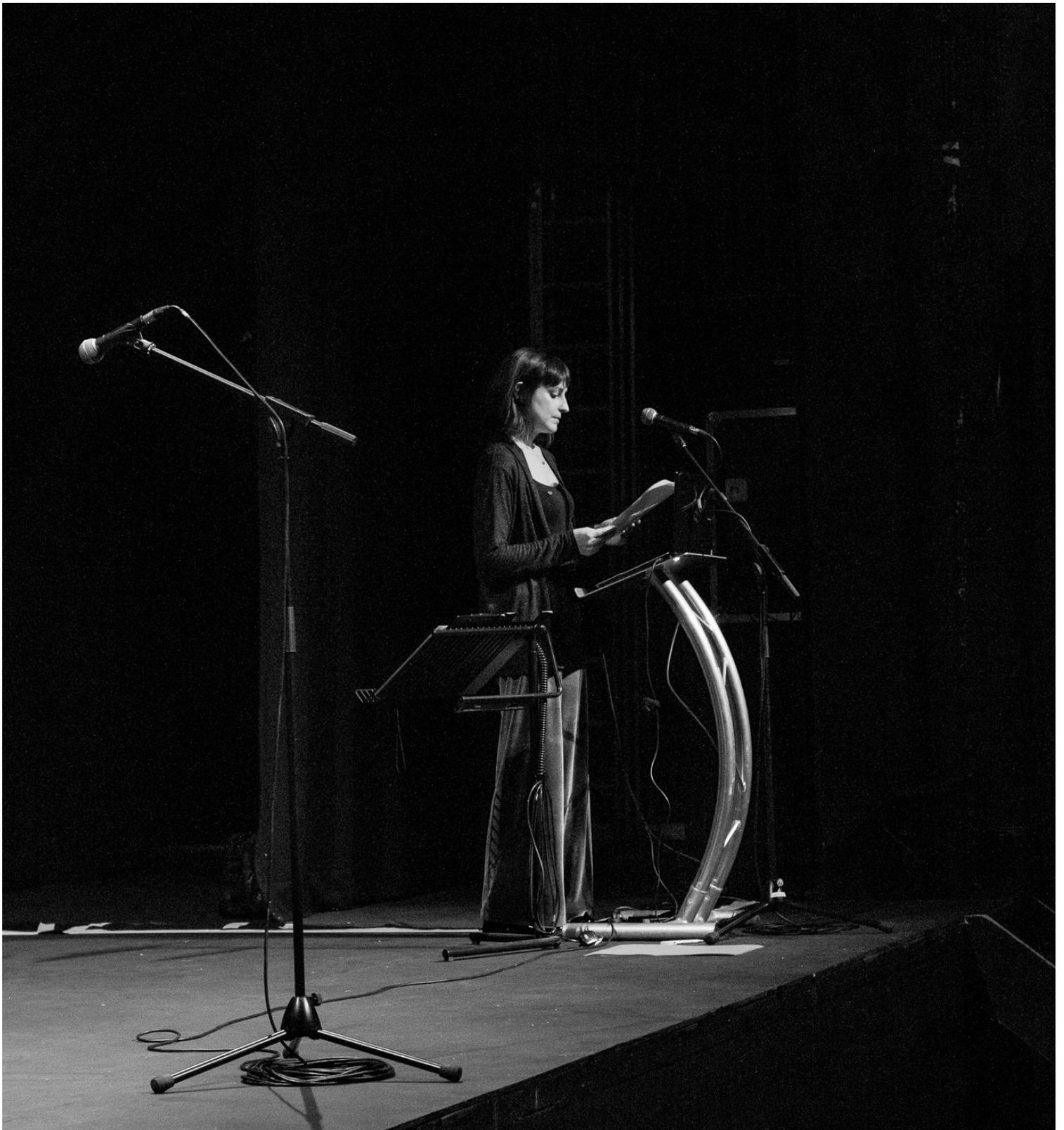
I went to Srebrenica for the first time 15 years ago, as a political science student. For the first time I saw the multitude of white gravestones in the cemetery reserved for the people who were killed in those days of July. The day before the commemoration, trucks coming from the capital Sarajevo carried the green coffins containing the remains of the victims who were identified throughout the year. On that day in 2005, in front of more than 35.000 people who came to attend the ceremony, 580 coffins were buried.

One of the clearest memories I cherish from that first trip was meeting Teofik, a young man who was a teenager during the war. Standing next to his father's grave he told us how much it meant to him and his family to finally have found his father's remains, while many others were still looking for their loved ones. Today, 15 years later, more than 1000 are still missing. At the time, I was aware of how my grandparents suffered from war and persecution but hearing someone my age talking about his experience of war opened up new perspectives for me. I felt that war was closer to me, closer to people 'like me', with whom I shared common interests, ways to have fun, and desires for the future.

What I felt at that time was a sense of dismay, common to many in discovering that war can be close to us in time and space. How is it possible to find war in the heart of Europe, a place that after the Holocaust we thought was immune from hate? Many simplistic explanations have been given and the war in Bosnia has been often misrepresented as the predictable result of attempting to put people from different religions and ethnicities together. We should overturn this misleading representation and instead try to understand how virulent nationalist rhetoric can easily manipulate words like 'religion', 'ethnicity' and 'identity' for political purposes. We can then easily see how these mechanisms cannot be ascribed just to the Balkans.

Srebrenica today is a small town, much smaller than it used to be. Many people went back to live there after the war, but the poor economic conditions do not give opportunities, especially to young people, to build a sustainable future, and the population continues to decrease. If you were walking around the streets of Srebrenica one evening in this season of the year, you'd notice that many windows are dark. Many buildings are empty. But if we tried to focus on the lit windows, rather than on the dark ones, we would see that life goes on in Srebrenica. Unfortunately, the efforts of those who have relentlessly been working all these years to improve life in their community, rarely make it to international news.

People lost loved ones, houses, jobs, everything that constitutes what we call a 'normal life'. What has also been heavily damaged is the social fabric. In particular, the war ended the well-established everyday practice of people living together by putting them on opposing sides. Learning more about Bosnia can teach us that when relationships are broken, the path to put the pieces back together is very long,



hard and its outcome uncertain. It is difficult for those who suffered to ascribe responsibility to individuals rather than to a whole group. In addition, it is difficult for people to acknowledge the guilt of their own side in a climate of widespread denial about war crimes. Despite being the most thoroughly documented war crime in history, the events of July 1995 are still subject to denial and revisionism, especially from political leaders in power. This is why Bosnian Serbs who wish to publicly acknowledge what happened in Srebrenica are called traitors by their own people.

Today Srebrenica presents us with remarkable examples of resistance and efforts to tear down the labels that toxic nationalism applies to people. This work is not always visible, sometimes it is done by organizations, more often it takes place in more informal ways, but it is there and needs to be acknowledged. It is done by those people who fight for truth, those who wish to focus on common problems rather than differences, those who educate their children to respect others and think with their own heads, those who want Srebrenica to be a beautiful place to live.

That first trip started my interest in researching the former-Yugoslavia, and after 2005 I went back to Bosnia and to Srebrenica countless times. Over the years, besides the commemoration of the genocide, I witnessed many more images that became a mosaic showing how complex that context is.

So, to answer to my initial question, it is important to talk about Srebrenica to repeat once more that the genocide happened and to remember those who are no more. It is also important to think about those who live there today still bearing the consequences of those crimes and those who work in very difficult conditions to build a better future for the whole community. Moreover, Srebrenica gives us the tools to question the ways, sometimes too simplistic, in which we look at other conflicts around the world. Finally, it helps us to look at what happens within our own borders with different eyes. What are the ways in which the 'other' is shaped as a rival? To this question we always have to search for answers.