

Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide

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Every Wednesday through June 11, join us for **Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide**, exploring past and present atrocities through the oral histories of genocide survivors in our region. Produced in partnership with the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center.

Chapter Eight

SELENA'S STORY: A SURVIVOR OF THE BOSNIAN GENOCIDE

Written by Selena Salihovic, survivor of the Bosnian Genocide and a UW student.

Between 1992 and 1995, the Muslim population of Bosnia, a country located in Eastern Europe, became victim to a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing and genocide. By the end of 1995, Bosnian Serb forces, under the leadership of President Slobodan Milosevic, systematically murdered over 200,000 Muslim civilians and displaced two million.

My name is Selena Salihovic. I was born in 1989 in Bosnia and Herzegovina — more specifically a town called Bijeljina. I am Bosnian. The following story is one that my family and I lived through though I only remember it in pieces. I was too young to really understand the politics of the war.

In 1992, the small town of Bijeljina had dozens of nightclubs that attracted many of the townspeople. Among those clubs, two were nationalist clubs: one called Istanbul and one called Serbia. Each club represented a religious group within Bosnia — Istanbul for the Bosnians (who were primarily Muslim) and Serbia for the Christian Orthodox. On the night of March 31, someone bombed the club called Istanbul. Luckily, the bomb didn't kill anyone and injured few.

Zeljko Raznjatovic, better known as military leader Arkan, had his army, the Serb Volunteer Guard, waiting in a village next to Bijeljina. Arkan's army was waiting for a sign: a sign that would trigger an attack on the Bosnian population. The Istanbul bombing was the excuse and the sign that he needed.

On the eve of April 1, Arkan's army had already infiltrated Bijeljina. They robbed the banks and occupied the radio stations, police stations and City



Selena Salihovic in Seattle, 2008.

Hall. On the morning of April 1, his army waited in the center of the town and systematically began moving through Bijeljina, killing everyone who was not a Serb. To counter this, the common people set up barricades around the town center, urging people to go back to their homes and alerting them of what had happened. In the three days Arkan's army occupied our town, they murdered hundreds of innocent people just because they were not Serbs.

On the morning of the third day, the neighboring Serbian villages heard the news of Bijeljina. They gathered the buses from their villages and came to assist the Bosnians. They were offering us refuge on a large government-owned farm surrounded by a fence. We trusted them.

When we arrived at the farm, the Serbian villagers separated the Bosnian males and females. The males spent the night standing in the open. The women and children were either in an office building or outside on the grass. We realized that this was not the safe haven we had expected. In the morning we all demanded to go home. The guards agreed to let the females go home, but they wouldn't allow the men to leave. They assured us that they would let them go sometime later that day. Shortly after, a truck with a covered canopy arrived. In the back of the truck was a man who claimed to have witnessed the

rape of two Serbian nurses. This witness was brought to the location to find and pinpoint the two men who had allegedly committed the rape. If he waved his hand, you were free to leave but if he simply stuck it out from behind the canopy, you were not allowed to go. All of the men were gathered, including my father and his good friend Maid, a soccer player who knew every soul that resided in Bijeljina. All but two men were granted leave; Maid was one of them.

As my family and I walked back to Bijeljina, we heard two shots behind us. Maid and the other man were dead.

We stayed in Bijeljina for three more years, not wanting to leave my ill grandfather behind. The violence in Bijeljina continued, but it was muted. Unlike Sarajevo, no bombs were dropped on our city. Instead, people began disappearing or being killed in the middle of the night. We lost many friends and many members of our extended family.

In 1995, our family escaped from the country and went to a refugee camp in Hungary. After a year our family was able to come to the United States. We try to go back to Bosnia once a year or once every two years. It is never the same place that we left 11 years ago. Our family is no longer there.

For more information on this article or others in this series, please contact the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center: www.wsherc.org or info@wsherc.org.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ❖ Serb Military leader, Arkan, waited for a sign to trigger an attack on the Muslim population, what was that sign?
- ❖ Why do you think there is religious conflict in the world? Using today's newspaper, can you locate an example of violence that resulted from being a different religion? Do you see similar religious barriers for people living in the United States? Why or why not? Share the article and your personal opinions on this subject with your class.