

NUSRETA SIVAC's VOICE

“My name is Nusreta Sivac and I come from Prijedor, a city in northwest part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before I share my very difficult experience in the concentration camp in Omarska, I would like to say that I am very happy to see that the tradition of Voices continues. I am also pleased to see some of the participants at the Voices from South Africa in 2001. For me it is very important that we have been given another opportunity to speak and that our voices are heard again.

In April 1992 the Bosnian Serbs took forcibly power in Prijedor, that with the help of police, the former Yugoslav army (who at that time was composed of only Serbs) and the paramilitary forces from Serbia. In Prijedor the majority population was of Bosnian Bosniaks (Muslims), then Serbs (Ortodox Christians), Croats (Catholics) and other minority communities. Soon after Serbs took power, the areas populated by Muslims and Croats were started to be granated, houses were plundered, burned and then completely destroyed. ‘Ciscenje’ or ‘Cleaning’ was the terminology Serbs used for ethnic cleansing of Muslims and Croats. All the Muslim and Croat population in those areas was taken to the existing concentration camps. Later on men and women were divided, men would remain in the concentration camps and majority of women and children were later gathered in tracks and taken close to the borders of the Federation from where they sought protection of the Bosnian army.

In the city of Prijedor at that time, freedom of movement was strictly limited. Muslims and Croats had to wear white bands around their arms and had to have white flags on the windows of their apartments. Soon after even they were take to the concentration camps. That were created in Prijedor; Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje.

One of the first days after that Serbs took the power in Prijedor I went to work. I was 40 years old and worked as a judge in the Municipality Court. When I came a group of Serb solders were waiting for me with a list of names in their hands. They asked me for my name and then informed me that I will no longer work there. In that moment I thought that was the worst thing that could ever happen to me and later I realized that was only introduction to the worst thing that could ever happen to a human being.

On 9 June 1992, I was invited to the police station in Prijedor for an information meeting. However, no meeting was conducted and I was instead taken onto a buss by members of the Serb military forces. I did not know in what direction I was taken. Only when we arrived I understood that I was taken to the Omarska concentration camp. I had heard about the Concentration Camp before but I never knew that also women were taken there. When I came I saw thousands of men, and I knew many of them.

In the Omarska concentration camp there were ca 3,500 men and 36 women, and I was the first women taken there from Prijedor. Two other women were from a neighboring municipality, Kozarac. In the concentration camp were persons of all ages, even minors. Sometimes an entire family was detained, but they could not be together as men and women were separated. The same day I arrived I was questioned, and I never knew what I was accused. Around the entire concentration camp there were Serbs guards. No one was allowed to move and walk inside the camp. Women were isolated from men and they were placed in two rooms. The rooms were placed above the restaurant. Before the war Omarska was a coal mine which was later transformed to a concentration camp. The prisoners received only one meal per day, usually consisting of a small peace of bread, a little bean soup, and little coleslaw. The detainees in the Camp had only two to three minutes to finish their meal. If they would not manage to eat up their meal during that time they would be severely beaten, sometimes to death. Soon men were loosing weight because of the difficult conditions. They started to feel sick and had stomach infections due to the very bad hygienic conditions. When the detainees would go to eat they had to pass a line of Serb guards that would beat them. Many stopped going to eat in order to avoid being beaten.

During the nights, I was in one of the rooms above the restaurant together with other women. During the day, the same rooms were used for questioning. Every day, detainees were questioned, during which they were beaten and tortured, and we would hear them screaming every day. They would beat them with different objects that were specifically made for those purposes. When we would hear them screaming, then the Serb guards would play very loud music. In the evenings we would leave the restaurant, where we had spent all day working, giving food and cleaning etc. When we would come up to the rooms to sleep, we had first to clean the rooms because blood was everywhere. On the floor we would often find pieces of cloth of the detainees' that were full of blood. I have often seen the equipment used for torture in the room.

My days in Omarska would start by accounting the numbers of dead persons, of persons that were killed during the night. We would see them on the grass in front of the "white house", which was a little building where the worst torture was

committed. The killed men would be placed in the trucks and they would be taken somewhere. In Omarska, persons were dying mostly due of torture. I have seen Once, one Serb guarding soldier took a knife and made a cross on a women's face. I saw in front of my eyes how they were torturing my former colleagues, friends, and persons I knew. The worst feeling I had was that I could not do anything, I felt helpless. I could not help all those who suffered so much.

Women had to work and had to clean and do everything they were asked by the concentration camp guards. Besides all that, the worst were the nights for women in Omarska because the guards would come to the rooms and take us somewhere in the camp and rape. That happened on a regular basis. We were not allowed to say anything to anybody. I was regularly raped and beaten. I was the only remaining judge, all other male Muslims and Croats judges were killed.

Day after day went in the Omarska concentration camp. The dead persons were replaced with newly arrived persons. As we worked in the kitchen we could account the number of plates. During my stay at the concentration camp many men were killed due to torture, many of them were massacred. I have seen massacred bodies and that drunken guards jumped on those bodies and sang Serb nationalistic songs. Those songs were heard every day. Even the Concentration camp detainees were forced to sing those songs (while their friends, neighbors were tortured and screamed for help). They also had to hold their hands up showing three fingers which is a Serb nationalistic sign and they had to sing "Hail Serbia".

One woman was mostly in the hose that was called "The white house". That woman was not allowed to be with us. When the prisoners were showered with the strong water pump, they would often lose consciousness due to the strong pressure. They then forced that woman to undress and showered her with the same and together with those men. She would constantly fall down, hiding her genitals. Many other weak men were falling down and then they were forced to stand up again. I was twice taken to that "white house" by one soldier to see tortured prisoners. I saw men in blood, their faces were transformed of torture, and I saw massacred bodies. There were thousands of insects on the bodies, and the smell was terrible. Often they would even force other prisoners too see those bodies, and it was used as psychological torture. Fathers would often see their sons being massacred and tortured, or sons would see their fathers being tortured and killed. Even some of the detained women would see their husbands tortured, and no one was ever allowed to help anyone. They would have risked their lives. The worst were the screams in the nights, and the cries for help. Once, I saw my cousin running on the grass area covered by the massacred bodies and he was desperately looking for his son. Then I saw them killing him.

Five of the women did not survive Omarska. Four of them were later found in a massgrave, and one is still missing. On 5 August 1992 the Omarska concentration camp was visited by the Red Cross and ITN British Television. When they announced the visit, women from the concentration camp were moved to Trnopolje concentration camp, as the Serb authorities claimed that there were no women detained in Omarska. In Omarska, they would find very small and sick men behind the fences as used in the concentration camps in Germany during World War II, and those photos you must have seen were of men that were only skeletons.

I today live in the same city, Prijedor and see some of the perpetrators and some of those that came already out from the Hague. There now live 99 per cent Serbs. The Media of Republic of Srpska never mentions those camps and never acknowledges what has happened. I am surrounded in a society that does not recognize what happened, which I find very difficult. Most of those taken to the Hague have been accused of crimes committed in Prijedor concentration camps. This ignorance of what has happened manifests itself in the former concentration camp in Trnopolje where a monument was built by the Serb authorities as a monument to the Serb heroes that have lost their lives fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Republic of Srpska. It is engraved on this monument: here have lost their lives those who were giving their lives to build the Republic of Srpska.

The authorities of the Republic of Srpska do not allow the families of victims of genocide to build any monument in Prijedor. Today Omarska Concentration camp is bought by the famous British-Indian company "Mittal". Mr. Mittal said that he did not know that a concentration camp ever existed there. We have been requesting that one monument for victims should be built there but the Mittal company said that they need approval by the authorities of the Republic of Srpska – which I think newer will give such a approval.

Today, the Republic Srpska exists and is based on ethnic cleansing and genocide as in Srebrenica. Before, Bosnia was never geographically divided. All ethnic groups lived together. Today, Bosnia is devided in Republic Srpska and the Federation. The Republic of Srpska consists to 99 per cent of Serbs and the Federation of Bosnia consists of mostly Croats and Bosniaks. Today, over 500,000 Muslims are refugees outside their home country. Refugees have never returned but only got back their destroyed property. In practice it is impossible to return. There is discrimination of returnees. I have decided to stay in Prijedor, but I can never find a job there. I am every day traveling more than one hour to a city in the Federation to work.

I have been called to witness in the Hague, and I have seen the man that was regularly raping and beating me and other women. He was the worst to the women in the camp. I know that many of the women did not talk about their experiences

because it is extremely difficult to think and to talk about it, even for me today, but I have to be strong and to let my voice be heard.

Torture, concentration camps, genocide as in Bosnia, Rwanda and in the Nazi Germany, should never ever have happened. In Prijedor, thousands of men were killed. Over the last years, more than one hundred mass and single graves have been discovered. All those victims were civilians, and among them many were women and children. Still a large number of persons are still missing.

Lastly, I would like to remind us that this is Europe where we thought that concentration camps belonged to the past and would never happen again. Unfortunately, the concentration camps in Bosnia is something very rarely spoken about, which is dangerous. We should not close our eyes to what happened. We should condemn it and never allow it to happen again".