



Fadila Efendic, 74, sits in her living room, where pictures of her son and husband, victims of the Srebrenica genocide in the village of Potocari near Srebrenica, Bosnia, hang on the wall on June 28. During the July 1995 genocide a total of 22 members of her family were killed. (AP/Armin Durgut)

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Srebrenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina — July 20, 2025

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Three decades after their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons were killed in the bloodiest episode of the Bosnian war, women who survived the Srebrenica massacre find some solace in having been able to unearth their loved ones from far-away mass graves and bury them individually at the town's memorial cemetery.

The women say that living near the graves reminds them not only of the tragedy but of their love and perseverance in seeking justice for the men they lost.

"I found peace here, in the proximity of my loved ones," said Fadila Efendic, 74, who returned to her family home in 2002, seven years after being driven away from Srebrenica and witnessing her husband and son being taken away to be killed.

The Srebrenica killings were the crescendo of Bosnia's 1992-95 war, which came after the breakup of Yugoslavia unleashed nationalist passions and territorial ambitions that set Bosnian Serbs against the country's two other main ethnic populations — Croats and Bosniaks.

'I wait for the door to open; I know that it won't open, but still, I wait.
—Aisa Omerovic

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On July 11, 1995, Serbs overran Srebrenica, at the time a U.N.-protected safe area. They separated at least 8,000 Bosniak men and boys from their wives, mothers and sisters and slaughtered them. Those who tried to escape were chased through the woods and over the mountains around town.

Bosniak women and children were packed onto buses and expelled.

The executioners tried to erase the evidence of their crime, plowing the bodies into hastily dug mass graves and scattering them among other burial sites.

Mothers have sought remains of loved ones for years

As soon as the war was over, Efendic and other women like her vowed to find their loved ones, bring them back and give them a proper burial.



An aerial view of the Srebrenica Genocide Memorial Center in Potocari, Bosnia, on June 28 (AP/Armin Durgut)

"At home, often, especially at dusk, I imagine that they are still around, that they went out to go to work and that they will come back," Efendic said, "That idea, that they will return, that I am near them, is what keeps me going."

To date, almost 90% of those reported missing since the Srebrenica massacre have been accounted for through their remains exhumed from hundreds of mass graves scattered around the eastern town. Body parts are still being found in death pits around Srebrenica and identified through painstaking DNA analysis.

So far, the remains of more than 6,700 people – including Efendic's husband and son — have been found in several different mass graves and reburied at the memorial cemetery inaugurated in Srebrenica in 2003 at the relentless insistence of the women.

"We wrote history in white marble headstones and that is our success," said Kada Hotic, who lost her husband, son and 56 other male relatives in the massacre.

"Despite the fact that our hearts shiver when we speak about our sons, our husbands, our brothers, our people, our town, we refused to let (what happened to) them be forgotten."



Goats are seen outside one of the destroyed houses in Potocari, Bosnia, on June 29. (AP/Armin Durgut)

The Srebrenica carnage has been declared a genocide by two U.N. courts.

Dozens of Srebrenica women testified before the U.N. war crimes tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, helping put behind bars close to 50 Bosnian Serb wartime officials, collectively sentenced to over 700 years in prison.

The loss that never goes away

After decades of fighting to keep the truth about Srebrenica alive, the women now spend their days looking at scarce mementos of their former lives, imagining the world that could have been.

Sehida Abdurahmanovic, who lost dozens of male relatives in the massacre, including her husband and her brother, often stares at a few family photos, two handwritten notes from her spouse and some personal documents she managed to take with her in 1995.

"I put these on the table to refresh my memories, to bring back to life what I used to have," she said. "Since 1995, we have been struggling with what we survived and we can never, not even for a single day, be truly relaxed."



Sefika Mustafic, 72, poses for a photo while holding a picture of her family members, victims of the Srebrenica genocide, in her home in the village of Potocari near Srebrenica, Bosnia, on June 29. During the 1995 genocide a total of 15 members of her family were killed. (AP/Armin Durgut)

Suhra Malic, 90, who lost two sons and 30 other male relatives, is also haunted by the memories.

"It is not a small feat to give birth to children, to raise them, see them get married and build them a house of their own and then, just as they move out and start a life of independence, you lose them, they are gone and there is nothing you can do about it," Malic said.

Summers in Srebrenica are difficult, especially as July 11, the anniversary of the day the killing began in 1995, approached. Thousands of people from Bosnia and around the world gathered in Srebrenica to mark the 30th anniversary of the massacre there — an atrocity that has been acknowledged as Europe's only genocide after the Holocaust.

In her own words, Mejra Djogaz "used to be a happy mother" to three sons, and now, "I look around myself and I am all alone, I have no one."

"Not a single night or day goes by that I do not wake up at 2 or 3 after midnight and start thinking about how they died," she said.

Aisa Omerovic agrees. Her husband, two sons and 42 other male relatives were killed in the massacre. Alone at home, she said she often hears the footsteps of her children and imagines them walking into the room. "I wait for the door to open; I know that it won't open, but still, I wait."

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