Coffee with the Souls of Srebrenica

By Ambassador Muhamed Sacirbey

Photo: Sanjin Avdičević, - Sto Te Nema? monument, Yonge-Dundas Square, Toronto, July 11, 2014

For most, the Srebrenica Genocide has become a footnote in history once again linking horrific crimes against fellow man that many thought could “Never Again” occur after the
horrors of the Holocaust, particularly on the same continent, Europe. For me, it is still a responsibility to demand accountability from those who not only committed the crime but also who allowed it to happen, a shameful betrayal. However, for the families of the victims, the moment of loss persists more than two decades later. Bodies, or more accurately fragments are being recovered still today and awaiting identification and proper burial after being dispersed in multiple sites in efforts to conceal the crime. Mothers, wives and children still await the knock on the door thinking that perhaps a son, husband or father may actually walk back into their lives. A cup of Bosnian coffee brings back the senses to a happier time for families, villages and towns, but these cups will never be drunk. They remain full of memories, hot and very personal to each who continue to suffer this terrible loss and still awaiting closure.

When I had the opportunity to visit the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington soon after it had opened as Ambassador to the UN and then Foreign Minister of Bosnia & Herzegovina, several exhibits moved my intellect and emotions but none more than the loads of empty shoes of those who were murdered. Extermination speaks of numbers, but murder translates into the loss of each individual life and the void left within the families and communities of those killed.

A cup of coffee, waiting to be drunk and remaining full represents Srebrenica, indeed all of BiH, the lost moments and yearning for thousands - it is the empty shoes of the Holocaust. As the organizers of this monument write:

“Conceived as a participatory nomadic monument, “Što Te Nema?” (Where Have You Been?) travels to a new location annually, enabling different communities to commemorate the Srebrenica Genocide collectively and in a public space on its anniversary. The monument consists of a growing collection of fildžani, small porcelain coffee cups, continuously collected and donated by Bosnian families from all over the world. The number of fildžani roughly corresponds to the growing number of body remains found, identified, and buried to date. Every July 11th, the public is invited to participate by placing the collected cups on the ground and filling them with Bosnian coffee prepared on site throughout the day. This year, the chosen host city is Boston, and the host organization of the project is New England Friends of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
First created by Aida Šehović 11 years ago, I had the opportunity to witness the 2nd annual version of the “Što Te Nema?” monument at the United Nations. Šehović’s history is also of loss, originally from Banja Luka, another BiH city ethnically cleansed over two decades earlier.

“Using the mechanism of social engagement, Šehović’s work seeks to reconcile histories of loss, trauma and violence that peoples and nations have suffered and perpetrated on each other. Since 2006, her participatory nomadic monument, “Što Te Nema?” has been traveling to a new location annually, and was thus far set up in cooperation with different communities in Geneva, Istanbul, The Hague, Stockholm and Toronto, among others. Šehović’s group exhibitions include the Queens Museum, Socrates Sculpture Park, Trinity Museum and the Flux Factory, among others.”
We know that “never again” remains an elusive commitment, and thus “never forget” calls upon all of us to be active in countering intolerance, hate and the symptoms of an illness that would make identity a rationale for persecuting or murdering the other. Forgiveness is also possible, but too many of those who committed the crimes and their apologists remain unrepentant or even celebratory in rationalizing the extermination. Many of the victims/families are still subjected to continuing efforts to complete genocide and/or consolidate its consequences. Those who betrayed Srebrenica, and failed to protect the UN and NATO “safe area” from the murderers, seek to repel demands for a true inquiry or change to reverse the consequences of genocide. (See: “Smoking Gun on Betrayal & Genocide“) For victims, their families to forgive, there needs to be a request for forgiveness. Thus, “never forget” is an active verb for most Bosnians and Herzegovinians. For those families and friends though that have suffered the loss of a loved one, this monument reminds of what was lost and what could have been of the lives and life.
“Što Te Nema?”, (#StoTeNema#Srebrenica) besides being an exceptionally meaningful tribute to those who are no longer with us, is also unique in its collaborative nature. This year, the volunteers and contributors list includes a very diverse group of individuals of all background, who collectively take a strong stand against genocide, as a crime against entire humanity that affects us all, directly and indirectly. To add an even more special meaning to the construction of the monument, a Boston staple, the Trinity Church, has graciously agreed to grant “Što Te Nema?” water access- a crucial necessity to adequately execute the logistics of the project. The Bosnian American community in the area sees this as a beautiful sign of positive interfaith relations, and a show of true Bostonian spirit.

If you happen to be in Boston, pass by Copley Square, take in the smell of freshly made Bosnian coffee and contemplate the role and responsibility that each one of us has in making sure that “Never again” is not only an overused empty phrase but rather a reality for people all around the world because as we speak, the “Never again” unfortunately has
turned to “Once again” in many places around the globe. (See: Sto Te Nema? Press Release for July 11, 2016 Monument details)

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