Remember Bosnia 20 years on

The Grand Mufti • Salma Yaqoob • Babar Ahmad
Bosnian Art, Craft, Food, Fashion & Travel
Where were you?
Art often serves as a reaction to major events. Ali Khimji meets an artist who uses cups of coffee to remember those who were systematically executed in Srebrenica.
she has been left wondering how they find the strength to live and go on after such a loss. "When I was trying to imagine what the families from Srebrenica must be going through, I kept thinking about this famous Bosnian song in my head. It’s an old, beautiful song called ‘Sto te nema?’, which translates into English as both ‘Where are you?’ and ‘Why are you not here?’"

Aida was born and raised in Banja Luka, a city in the northwestern part of Bosnia, but like many Muslim families in her locality, she was forced to leave during the ethnic cleansing of the early 1990s. From Bosnia, she went with her mother and sisters to Turkey where they lived for a year in different areas of the country. She then moved to Berlin, where they were reunited with Aida’s father who had been stuck in Bosnia until then. They could not return home, so decided to move to America after Aida finished high school. Moving so frequently has had a profound effect on Aida’s grasp of identity in a modern context. “I find the word ‘identity’ very problematic because it reduces people to simple categories, and we are more complex than that,” she says. “We were persecuted in our hometown for being Muslim, but in Turkey we were judged for not being Muslim enough. Now I feel comfortable and confident with all of it, being Bosnian, Muslim, American, an artist, a woman. But I also understand that I can choose and decide how to be all of these ‘identities’.”

As well as Sarajevo, she has taken her installation to the United Nations Headquarters in New York and The Hague in The Netherlands, where the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia is being held. For Aida, the place that has stuck most in her memory is Tuzla, a city in Bosnia where many of the surviving family members of Srebrenica live, because it allowed Women of Srebrenica, an NGO who helped Aida to collect the cups initially, to participate in the installation.

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She hopes that the project continues as long as there is a desire, interest and the need to remember what happened in Srebrenica, and feels that her role in the project has changed over the years. “I started as a creator or instigator of an idea, but have now become the caretaker of a monument that has no permanent home,” she says. “In this way, the whole entity depends on the interest and involvement of others in order to exist.” Aida is currently in talks with a few groups in St Louis in America about taking the installation there, because it has one of the largest Bosnian populations in the US.

Many people see art as an outlet to deal with the emotions and feelings that are experienced after such atrocities or tragedies occur, and Aida is in agreement. “I cannot imagine a world without art,” she says. “It is the only place where absolute freedom of ideas and creativity exists. It allows us to grow and develop, both as individuals and communities, in unpredictable and unique ways.”

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The public is invited to participate in Aida’s art installation by pouring coffee into the cups placed on the ground. She has taken her art installation around the world, and hopes to go to St Louis this year, which is home to a large Bosnian American community.