

Srebrenica 14 June 2025

Imagine I was not here...

How would you describe me?

What would you learn from me?

...how would you remember me?

Remember, remember, remember, remember...How many times do we say it?

But what do you want to remember? ...who? ...where? ...how? ...why?

Memory is an enemy and memory is a friend.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends.

These words of Stephen Smith and Heidi Fried are reminiscences from January 2004 in Stockholm. The Swedish Government had organized a series of four discussion forum on genocide and related issues. The 2004 discussion was the last and it was entitled Genocide – Threats and Responsibilities. In his opening address, the late Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) Kofi Annan once again apologized the reluctance of the UN to react in Rwanda in spring 1994 when all signs of an approaching human catastrophe were visible. General Dallaire, the Commander of the UN Mission to Rwanda, had received earlier that year detailed plans of the genocide and asked a permission to confiscate the weapons from Hutus. This was rejected by UN HQ in New York. Kofi Annan could also have mentioned the appeal for air support put forward by Thom Karremans, then the Commander of Dutchbat, part of the peacekeeping mission in Srebrenica, UN's 'safe area'. People from the surrounding countryside had fled to Srebrenica hoping for protection

Today, we have gathered here to remember what happened 30 years ago. And we have to ask ourselves, our decision makers, politicians and diplomats: haven't we learnt anything from the past.

The bloodiest century in the world history is behind us but its legacy has followed us to the new millennium. Researchers have estimated that in the 20th century, up to 220 million people were killed in wars between states, two world wars, genocides, in internal armed conflicts and acts of violence, during forcible collectivization's, factitious famines, forced transfers of population, in labor and prison camps and as a result of violence that states have used against their own citizens.

If we look back into the history of the 20th century, we can find several examples of misjudgments of humanitarian crises. I have chosen three of them:

In the late 1930's, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain commented on Germany's policy towards Czechoslovakia as being "a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing". How wrong was Chamberlain not while characterizing the territorial claims Germany put forward to Czechoslovakia at the time like this.

Correspondingly, Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, annoyed at the negative reaction to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from the Carter Administration, established that "Afghanistan is a very small country, very remote".

And finally, in May 1993, US State Secretary Warren Christopher described the Bosnian war as "a humanitarian crisis a long way from home, in the middle of another continent. The Bosnian war was much more than that. It was the worst mass destruction in Europe after the WW2.

I have often been asked whether a mass destruction like genocide could be prevented. It is my personal view that the question should be posed in a totally different form: do we want to prevent mass destruction and crimes against humanity. People and relief organizations functioning at grass roots level recognize the beginning of humanitarian crises. People who feel being threatened are our mentors and it is our duty to listen to them. The means to prevent do exist. The UN Security Council could act but the problem is the veto right of the five permanent members of the Council.

The US journalist and writer Samantha Powers has said: "If we look carefully at ourselves in the mirror, most of us must accept the fact that we ourselves are the problem of a genocide". She also emphasizes the ethical duty of an individual to refrain from being silent.

I visited Srebrenica in March 1996 with Miguel Gil Moreno de Mora, photographer of Associated Press and human rights lawyer. He was later killed in an ambush in Africa. I wrote the following words of remembrance to his mother:

It is our duty to give
face to those who suffer or whose faces have been crushed,
voice to those who do not have it or who have been deprived of it,
so that we could see their pain and suffering,
so that we hear their call.
Only then we can learn what has happened,
and most importantly, we must not forget.

Eliel Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Laureate in 1986, has referred to the memory and remembering in his speech '*Hope, Despair and Memory*' in Oslo with these words: *Remembering is a noble and necessary act. Without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque like a prison into which no light penetrated; like a tomb which rejects the living.*

It is true that we cannot build our future on the rejection of the past. In addition, it has been said that the memory of evil and death serves as a shield against evil and death. We have to be honest: there are moments when we are powerless to prevent injustice but there must never be a time we fail to protest. Throughout the human history, those in power have subjected ordinary people and people like writers, scientists and intellectuals to torture and persecution. Yet we have to show the courage and forget our comfortable role as passive onlookers. There are two sets of decision makers: those, who decide to make war and those, who follow the alarming developments, keep their meetings, send cables, express their concerns and finally decide to do nothing.

The deliberate destruction of monuments, places of worship and works of art is evidence of the drift towards total war. The Library in Sarajevo was destroyed in August 1992. The invaluable books and manuscripts, whole Islamic cultural heritage, were burnt to ashes. Already in 1821, Heinrich Heine wrote: *Where they burn books, in the end they will also*

burn human beings. This we have witnessed in the Balkans. This is the other face of genocide.

How could we break the vicious circle of hatred and revenge, which is so easily transmitted to the future generations? There are no easy answers, but I will always remember the words of the late President Martti Ahtisaari to me: if the parties of the conflict are not genuinely willing to gain peace and reconciliation, there is no hope for success in mediation.

The process of transmission of transgenerational trauma is unconscious. Grandparents and parents may have no intention to pass it on to their offspring, and yet children have heard and listened something and sensed odd speechlessness, the conspiracy of silence. Is it possible or desirable to forget the past atrocities and look toward the future? How to live with the dreadful memories and yet maintain your mental stability? So many people have to because they have survived.

Today, memories of my first visit to Srebrenica in March 1996 have come like waves into my mind: people I have worked with in Tuzla; survivors I have met in refugee camps; discussions with mothers, wives and children hoping to learn of the fate of their missing family members; people who have lost nearly everything. They all have a right to know what has happened to their loved ones.

The Finnish Forensic Expert Team worked in Tuzla in 1996-1997. Together with local forensic experts and police authorities we collected and investigated human remains recovered in the vicinity of Srebrenica. The reports on manner and cause of death including contributing factors to the death were later submitted to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

And when I completed my first report on Srebrenica to the UN, I added a sentence of the human rights of the dead, only to be told that dead people have no rights. Now, years later, experts on human rights and scientists have started to study this issue at London School of Economics. To me, dead people have the right to be buried in a grave that carries their own true name according to their religion and traditions of their community.

In Tuzla, a young nurse came to my office. She had been wounded during the war and her husband, father of their two children, was missing. She opened her bag and handed to me a laminated photograph of two laughing young men, they were cousins. There was a text:

memory from Srebrenica, May 1995. The photograph had been taken less than 2 months before Serbian troops marched to the town. The photograph was familiar to me. I asked my assistant to bring an envelope from the archive and showed her the same photograph I had found in the pocket of a victim, whose remains we had recovered on the mountains in the vicinity of Srebrenica. For a second, I tried to find words to say something. She said two single words: thank you. She had hoped that her husband was still alive, possible in a secret prison camp. But now she has learnt what had happened. The truth could help her and their children to close the door to the past and to look towards the future, to start the reconstruction of her own and their children's life and their broken community. And today they have a grave to visit and to remember him, the husband and the father. Weeks later we were invited to their village for commemoration.

Genocide is death, but genocide is also curse of survival, genocide is a black hole in the spectrum of all reasoned thought, genocide is the ultimate loss of humanity.

Genocides never happen by chance. They happen because:

there are people who want them to happen,

people who are prepared to conduct them

and people who allow them to be conducted.

Remember: silence is a form of word, inaction an act of conspiracy.

Remembrance is ninety nine percent of forgetfulness and one percent of reworked narrative of another's experience. Everything we ever remember is important, but it is even more important what we must not forget.

Genocide is not an act of murder, it is thousands and millions of acts of murder. The Nazis did not kill six million Jews, the Interahamwe nearly million Tutsis, the Serbs not thousands of inhabitants of Srebrenica. They killed one and then another, then another....

Do not forget the survivors,

do not condemn them to a second death, oblivion.

They are our teachers and they only have us.