



## **Interview with Nusreta Sivac, 2020 Recipient of the Civic Courage Award**

*The Center for Bosnian Studies' Civic Courage Award is intended to recognize individuals who exhibit courageous commitment to the civic values of respect, equality, and pluralism that represent the best traditions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The presentation of the award and events planned in March were cancelled due to COVID-19. In their stead, the Center arranged to record an interview that would allow Ms. Sivac to talk about her experiences.*

Interview Date: December 30, 2020

Translated by Adna Karamehic-Oates.

### ***Adna Karamehic-Oates***

Welcome to everyone watching today. My name is Adna Karamehic-Oates and I am the Director of the Center for Bosnian Studies at Fontbonne University. The Center is a historical and cultural preservation initiative at Fontbonne University directed at establishing an enduring record of the experiences of Bosnian genocide survivors and their families. It is especially focused on those living in metropolitan St. Louis, which is currently the largest Bosnian population outside Bosnia, estimated at 60,000.

The Center began as the Bosnia Memory Project in 2006 and was renamed the Center for Bosnian Studies to reflect its increasing role as a hub of knowledge and resources about Bosnia. It preserves stories and artifacts from the Bosnian war and genocide through an oral history project, special collections with many rare items, and a growing digital collections of unique resources on Bosnia and its diaspora. The Center for Bosnian Studies also hosts events to raise awareness about Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Bosnian diaspora, and participates in research endeavors focused on Bosnia.

One of the most important events that the Center organizes is the presentation of the Civic Courage Award. This Award is intended to recognize individuals who exhibit courageous commitment to the civic values of respect, equality, and pluralism that represent the best traditions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In normal times, recipients are presented with the award at a formal ceremony and reception hosted by the Center for Bosnian Studies. Of course, these are not normal times, and so we've had to adjust this year's ceremony to an online format. Nevertheless, we are incredibly pleased to spend some time today with the 2020 recipient of the Civic Courage Award, Ms. Nusreta Sivac. We'll spend about 45 minutes in a conversation with Ms. Sivac today, and hear her reflections on her experiences over the last 25 years advocating for truth about the crimes committed in Bosnia.

Some very brief background on Ms. Sivac before we begin. Working as a judge from 1978 until the outbreak of war Bosnia in 1992, Nusreta Sivac became an inmate at the Bosnian Serb-run Omarska camp in Prijedor, where she and other women at the camp were raped, beaten, and tortured. After the camp's closure, she became an activist for victims of rape and is credited with helping in the recognition of wartime rape as a war crime under international law. Ms. Sivac helped prepare indictments for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, where she has also testified. Her story is featured in the Emmy-award winning documentary *Calling the Ghosts: A Story about Rape, War, and Women*. She is a member of the Women's Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ms. Sivac, congratulations on the Award, and thank you so much for joining us.

### ***Nusreta Sivac***

A big thank you for recognizing me with this award. In these difficult and gloomy times, when we are all preoccupied with the pandemic – this honor, and nice event, helps ease and brighten the period for me. To the Center for Bosnian Studies, and to all of you that have contributed to my selection as the recipient of the Civic Courage Award for the year – I say thank you. I am happy that in my long standing work, which I have been engaged in for 25 years now, you recognized the issues that the Center is dedicated to and its own mission. Let me also take this opportunity to wish happy holidays to all those that will be watching this recording. I hope that 2021 will be much, much better, more relaxed, healthier, and friendlier, and that we will return to the lives we were living before the arrival of the virus.

It makes one happy – and perhaps we should not be modest – when the worth of something they have worked long for is recognized. The Civic Courage Award is one more support, one more demonstration that I did something useful and that I should continue doing so, of course as long as my health permits. I am already in my older years and I have spent so much time on this, but it is something I will never ever regret. I am of course sorry that we weren't able to have this event like we intended to, but it is not up to us – I wish us all good health, and who knows, maybe there will be an opportunity to see one another, how we originally planned, before the current situation was upon us.

### ***Adna Karamehic-Oates***

I certainly hope so too. Ms. Sivac, in my first question to you, I'd like to go backwards in time a bit, to the beginning of the war. When the war broke out, you were, like I mentioned in the introduction, a judge at the Municipal Court of Prijedor. You had been a judge since 1978. In this position, unlike perhaps a lot of Bosnian citizens, you had an insider's view of how the Bosnian Serbs were trying to de-construct Bosnia by creating shadow structures before they actually started attacking communities and carrying out ethnic cleansing and genocide. Can you tell us more about this time?

### ***Nusreta Sivac***

Like you mentioned, I live in Prijedor, I was born here. I have lived here all my life except for those years I was studying in Sarajevo. Prijedor is in northwest Bosnia, and somehow, in this part of the

country, we felt things much much before; that whirlwind of war, all those war-related events, first in Slovenia and then in Croatia, because we are so close to the border with Croatia. We were witnesses to the mobilization process, the departure for the front in Croatia, still under the cover of the Yugoslav National Army; even though the Yugoslav Army was just formally carrying that name, as it has already been largely cleansed of non-Serbs. Non-Serb citizens generally resisted – most of them did not want to go to the front in Croatia when they received their mobilization notice. They didn't see it as our war, they considered Croatia as having been attacked, that it was a case of aggression. So at that point, you already felt a division, on that national/ethnic basis, and the tensions already started really increasing. We were all watching what was happening in Croatia, those convoys that were going to western Slavonia, which is the part closest to Prijedor. They were pillaging tours.

Those that opposed the war were very resentful, they tried through different meetings to prevent it, but it was already too far gone, out of control. It was just a question of when it would happen in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At my work, we were just surviving all of that. Thankfully the war in Slovenia was very short. It ended well considering how things transpired in Croatia, not to mention Bosnia. At work, there was at first a gradual but then very obvious polarization of employees on this national/ethnic basis. So you had completely different views of the war in Croatia, which was being carried out under the cover of that Greater Serbia ideology that was propagated, supposedly about protecting Yugoslavia. It was ridiculous, it had nothing to do with Yugoslavia but was rather a sick ideology that originated in Serbia and whose goal was to establish 'Serb territories.' So, people had diverging views of the conflict in Croatia and in terms of how that played out in the local rule of law structures in Prijedor, perhaps an example is the best illustration.

When the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina made the decision to declare Bosnia and Herzegovina a sovereign country, one of the conditions of the international community was to call a referendum, where the citizens, through one of the most democratic processes, could express their will. By position, and according to regulations and laws at the time, the president of the local court is also the president of the electoral commission. At the time, the president of the court was a Muslim, or Bosniak as we say nowadays, and there were two judges, one of them a Serb and one Bosniak woman, also members of the commission. That Serb colleague did not want to participate in the electoral commission. Later, he told us, or rather me and my colleague, that he had received a warning from the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) that he should not be part of the referendum. The SDS and most Serbs were against the referendum; they were for this idea of remaining in Yugoslavia. But that could not have been Yugoslavia anymore, because Slovenia had left as well as Croatia. There are other examples, that there is not enough time for me to go into them. We heard about these parallel structures, about the establishment of a police, of course completely ethnically Serb, and I think all of what was happening was part of a plan, as part of strategic goals that were identified at the assembly of Serbs at Pale. None of what was happening was accidental; it was all by plan, it was systematic, creating the conditions for the worst of what was to happen later – the war crimes, the camps, all those things I experienced myself.

So, like I said, it was obvious, they remembered those who publicly expressed their views and those often ended up in a concentration camp, or they were liquidated.

***Adna Karamehic-Oates***

Let me ask you a little more about that – you explained how the conditions were being created for war crimes and the worst that of course came not long after, when the attack on Prijedor began. One of the markers of genocidal intentions was that Bosnian Muslims and Croats were forced to wear white armbands and had to hang white flags by their houses' windows. Then, they had their houses looted and burned while they were transported to the infamous Keraterm, Omarska, and Trnopolje concentration camps. You yourself were taken to the Omarska concentration camp. Did you know what awaited at Omarska?

***Nusreta Sivic***

Let me return for a moment to what you were saying about the white flags on non-Serb windows and houses, as well as the white armbands. That is only one in a string of criminal decisions in the total mosaic of all that happened in Prijedor. The SDS was in power but decisions were being made by the local authority, represented by the crisis unit in the municipality of Prijedor. Of course, I had heard in town, people were saying that concentration camps existed and they were taking people away there – Trnopolje, Keraterm, and Omarska. And a lot of people that I knew personally were taken, so I also heard it from members of their families. However, I did not suspect, even in my subconscious, that they were taking women to those camps. I thought ... I mean I was naive. And I paid a steep price for that naivete, as did many, many of my fellow non-Serb citizens. I thought, even the men that were being taken there, they would probably be interrogated ... in the proper way and under all the regulations in place at the time. And that most of them would be set free. Because Prijedor really did not have any organized military formations, the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina did not exist in Prijedor. The city of brotherhood and unity, city of the Third Enemy Offensive, a city that fought fascism ... I truly thought that all that was impossible here.

However, when I was taken to the Omarska camp, they didn't tell me where they were taking me. Actually first they just invited me for an informational meeting, something that many people were asked to do as well – that was just an excuse for the actual thing, that they're taking you to one of the camps, without any explanation, not to mention anything written where you can see why you're actually being taken there. So when I was asked to come for that informational meeting, I responded and went to the police building, where they put me on a bus. I still didn't know where I was going, only when the bus got closer to Omarska did it arise in my subconscious that perhaps they were taking me to a concentration camp. But I still had some hope, some optimism, that there had been a misunderstanding somewhere, that I would very quickly be leaving from there. Of course, that was not the case, I spent two months in the camp, along with 36 other women, and thousands of men.

***Adna Karamehic-Oates***

You were imprisoned at the Omarska concentration camp for 2 months, as you said, and the camp was closed only after the media, more specifically reporters Roy Gutman, Penny Marshall, Maggie O’Kane, and others, exposed their existence. After you were able to flee to neighboring Croatia, you and your fellow inmate at the camp, Jadranka Cigelj, started to gather testimonies from hundreds of rape victims. And that’s how you helped prepare the first indictment at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and personally testified in several cases. This must have been an extremely tumultuous time. These cases were before the court for months, some for years. What pushed you to keep going?

***Nusreta Sivic***

While I was still in Omarska, in all that horror, what was killing me was the helplessness that I could not change anything there. I watched members of my family disappear in front of my eyes; friends, work colleagues. In those rare, lucid moments, I imagined that maybe, maybe I would survive. That was just daydreaming at that point because it seemed impossible; the liquidations of the prisoners at the camp were a daily occurrence, and at moments it did not seem like there was a chance that anyone could survive. And the guards and the staff at the camp were saying so themselves, they must have gotten tired of it I suppose, they’d had enough of the torture and killing and wanted to get it all done quickly. I remember one guard saying “the best thing is if we buried you with an excavator right here and for all of this to be over with.” Of course, their plans were interrupted by the visit of this team from ITN, CNN and the International Red Cross, and thanks to them, thank God, some survived.

Watching all of that while at Omarska, I simply couldn’t understand how dark one’s soul could be to torture people like that, to enjoy it. Very few at the camp were killed by bullets. People most often succumbed from those terrible, terrible forms of torture that were being carried out on a daily basis. And so, like I said, in my internal daydreaming, I told myself that if I somehow survived, my life mission – I didn’t even know how long I would be alive to talk about it – would be to speak of that evil, so that everyone knows about it. And that’s how it was, once I was able to, with great, great difficulty to get to free territory in Croatia and to Zagreb. And once, after some time, members of my family were able to get there as well, particularly my brother with his family, who had also been a camp inmate. Of course, I fell into depression, the trauma was more than present, it was an enormous internal battle: to withdraw? Or run away somewhere? I had the opportunity to do so, there were international organizations operating in Croatia through which I could have gone to a European or some other country on the other side of the ocean, especially me, having been in a concentration camp.

However, I stayed there. Croatia was a kind of meeting point, a lot of people were coming not just from this northwestern part of Bosnia and Herzegovina but from other parts of the country as well, and the war was still raging in Bosnia. And I listened to those stories, stories very similar to mine and my peers’. So I told myself that I had to do something, of course there were other women there and we organized ourselves; they had actually already registered an organization, Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And I joined them and that’s where my work began. We collected details, stories, and

at that moment, I did that, how can I say, with enthusiasm. And I had hope, which to me was very very important, that some international mechanism would become functional – probably that was due to my professional background – to punish war crimes. There was still no talk of course about the establishment of a tribunal, and as for courts in Bosnia, that was just an illusion to expect them to hear war crimes cases, or we'd have a situation of everyone putting on trial the others and not those from their own nation, that was just a no go. The rule of law in Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with everything else at the time, was completely divided based on ethnicity.

And so we continued that work, and the first contact with the investigators of the Hague Tribunal was in the refugee center in Zagreb. That is where the contact was made and that collaboration is ongoing as long as, let's say, it is needed. The Tribunal has now finished its mission but what has remained is a residual mechanism, and the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina is processing war crimes cases. There will likely be work there, and I have a collaboration with them as well.

One, important, very important motive, besides all that I just said, was that I owed it to those that did not survive. I think that that takes not only courage, but humanity. It is human, first. In particular for those 5 women that didn't survive at Omarska, who were later found in various mass graves.

### ***Adna Karamehic-Oates***

Your experiences at Omarska, as you just described them, and then the indictments and trials at the ICTY, are the basis of the Emmy-award winning documentary "Calling the Ghosts." When you look back at the film now, what do you think is the most important contribution of this documentary in preserving the story of what happened in Bosnia?

### ***Nusreta Sivac***

I think my colleague Jadranka Cigelj and I achieved something very important with this film. The filming was quite long, two years if I remember correctly. With the help of Amnesty International, a screening tour was organized in different states around the United States, that lasted about two months. I think we visited 28 states, and the film was shown in various places, following which there were panels, discussions, debates, and so on. We had the chance to talk to members of Congress, senators, at the United Nations we met with Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General. I had the chance, together with my colleague Jadranka, to meet Richard Holbrooke, the creator of the Dayton agreement, and John Shattuck. So that was very, very effective. And the goal of the screening tour and the meetings with important persons in the American political establishment was the capture of war criminals and the classification of rape as a war crime. And there were already some indictments formulated at the Hague, but those indicted were not accessible. They were on the territory of the Republika Srpska and there was no way that they were going to be extradited because the leadership of the RS at the time was a priori rejecting any kind of collaboration with the Hague Tribunal, not to mention extraditing to the Tribunal. So, I think the film contributed significantly in that respect; Holbrooke made promises, as did other important individuals with influence – because of course the US was a country that participated in the establishment of the Hague Tribunal and financially supported it. So it was not too long after the screening tour that the

arrests began; I don't remember all the details as it has been a long time, but things started to move in the right direction.

What I am particularly happy about is that I, with my other colleagues and Jadranka, helped influence the decision that rape would be considered a war crime at the Tribunal. That was the first time in history. There were stories, I heard lots of women's stories, and I knew my peers' stories and my own, but there would be no impact until rape was treated as a war crime at the Tribunal. So I will say, I will not be modest about it, I am proud of that part of my activism. I think it was useful, for future generations, and it was useful what the Tribunal did through its work and mission. Its contributions will certainly be studied through all the archival work that has remained.

### ***Adna Karamehic-Oates***

You are in Prijedor, to which you returned about 20 years ago now. It is of course not the place it was before the war. Many of the people who committed crimes there – and many more who benefited from those crimes – remain at large. Prijedor is located in the Republika Srpska entity, and is overseen by Bosnian Serb authorities. You continue your activism, that life mission, as you described it. You have participated in almost every commemoration of White Armband Day, even the most recent one, when COVID-19 kept many others away. At the same time, the rhetoric of genocide denial, including from the authorities in Prijedor, remains and in the past year seems louder than ever. Are there are lessons learned from that time in the early 1990s that you can share and that can sharpen and strengthen how to respond to the rhetoric of genocide denial?

### ***Nusreta Sivic***

As far as Bosnia and Herzegovina is concerned, I think the situation now and in these last few years is worse than it was after the war, in all ways. In the political sense, not to mention the economic sense, and now we have the pandemic too. So when it comes to genocide and the treatment of genocide and war crimes, nothing has changed here. Those that are in leadership positions in the Republika Srpska, they are the successors of that same ideology that led to persecution, to killing, to concentration camps, to rape, and in the end to genocide. The ideology lives on in those territories, so that it is difficult to be where you lived through the worst. Though I have to say there have been some shifts. However, here – and I will focus myself on Prijedor as I know that context the best, though the demographic structure has not changed just in Prijedor but in almost all towns – while there are some small shifts like I said, they are very small. There are still no radical changes. All of it is somehow apprehensive, inconspicuous ... here only a very small number of people, of individuals, or non governmental organizations, are ready to admit – just admit – what happened in Prijedor, the terrible crimes. As for the leadership structures in Prijedor – it's like – say anything, just don't mention the white armbands or genocide. That is apparently the worst thing. Somehow it's possible for them to remain silent during talk about the mass graves, the number of those killed, but that (genocide and white armbands), that is the most scary thing, and what there is immediate resistance to. I think that the political structures are the most responsible – and I am not just talking about the local authorities but the entity authorities – they are the most responsible for why things are the

way they are. The media do not at all report how things are, rather they just confirm and affirm those crimes – calling them heroes and so on.

Then, the education system is wrong. In Republika Srpska they are not learning anything about what happened. They don't know anything about genocide. So, until that changes, and until there is not an initiative from the political authorities, this is an unsustainable situation. An exhausting situation. We have witnessed recently, from young people, the resistance to such a situation, an unbearable situation, and not just in the political sense, but also in the economic sense, in all spheres ... it's not working. The rule of law, everything, none of it is as it should be. They are resisting by leaving this country in search of a better life. Young people have given up the fight to change or fix something.

Here, war crimes are either rationalized, according to an established schematic that I now know by heart – “well it happened there, or all groups committed crimes.” Or, war crimes are minimized entirely, or they are negated. Even though there are facts, there is evidence, there are court rulings. I don't think that those people talk like that, I don't think that most of them have even read a single one of those rulings; they don't even know the facts. The mass graves have been discovered, over 60 of them, hundreds of individual ones. The biggest mass grave on the territory of Europe since World War Two was discovered in Prijedor, the mass grave called Tomasica. And that is overblown, many here say. So there is not a process, an open process, that has begun on dealing with the past, and I think that is a big, big necessity for any kind of future here.

The climax of that cynicism, that treatment of our gloomy, bloody past, was that even when it was determined that the most terrible acts against international human rights, against humanity, were committed; despite the charges that were brought against Karadzic and Mladic for heinous war crimes; in the end, they didn't qualify as genocide. We all know Srebrenica was a genocide, we know that by the rulings and the whole world is passing resolutions to that effect, and it is still being denied. So even if everything that had happened had qualified as genocide, I am not sure that it would have changed much in terms of the denial. But for the victims and their families of course, it would have been a big source of satisfaction.

So it is not enough, the work of the Tribunal is being negated and rejected, it's the same old broken-record narrative that the Tribunal is anti-Serb, that only Serbs are on trial – which is not true, nor does the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina only put Serbs on trial. It puts on trial all those who committed crimes for which there is evidence. On the territory of the former concentration camp Trnopolje there is a memorial, and that memorial says everything about how the local community is addressing war crimes. It's enough to just go and see that, to read that “on this spot fell those that gave their lives for the foundations of the Republika Srpska.” But there, there was no armed conflict; there were no Serb losses. It was a concentration camp where children, women, the elderly were imprisoned. And that says everything about how the local community is dealing with this terrible, terrible and bloody history. And it is one of the darkest periods in the history of Prijedor.

***Adna Karamehic-Oates***

Ms. Sivac, thank you for your thoughtful answer to this question, and to all my questions. I think you have reminded us in what kind of circumstances Bosnia and Herzegovina still finds itself and why, in particular, your activism is still so needed. And we are thankful – we all must be thankful – for your work, and I hope you continue to be such a strong advocate for truth, for as long as you're able to. I want to thank you and congratulate you once more on the Civic Courage Award for this year.

I also want to thank all those who are watching our discussion online, and highly recommend that if they have not already done so, so watch the excellent documentary "Calling the Ghosts."

Thank you.