

### **My Experience in Srebrenica**

The European Union representative who was present for the thirteenth anniversary of the Srebrenica Massacre said it best when he admitted there are no words to describe this place, what happened here and the feelings everyone had at that moment. I, too, was confounded by the gravity of what took place there within my lifetime in the very spot I stood. Srebrenica is a small mountain



village in eastern Bosnia, in Republika Srpska, just across the border from Serbia. In the early '90s, as Serbian forces maneuvered into Bosnian positions, Bosniaks in this general area conglomerated in this central village – and the population swelled to around 60,000. The Dutch

peacekeeping troops, from the UN, came here to help, but had limited communication and transportation because of the smothering Republika

Srpska forces. The peacekeeping troops quickly dropped to only 400 men without the proper resources for protecting the makeshift refugee camp. The UN turned to political efforts and designated Srebrenica as a safe area. That didn't stand long, and the people in Srebrenica started disappearing little by little until there was a mass slaughtering in July 1995 under orders from Republika Srpska leaders President Radovan Karadzic and General Ratko Mladic. It was the worst act of genocide in Europe since World War II. Over 8,000 names of the missing have been gathered.

The Srebrenica-Potocari memorial cemetery is large, and each year (on July 11<sup>th</sup>), local family and friends of the victims gather to reburry newly identified remains taken from the mass gravesites. This year there were 308 green canvas caskets, and I was confounded to be immersed in the liturgical commemoration of lost fathers, brothers and friends. I had made my way to the center of the crowd before local and international political figures began speaking of the events that took place in Srebrenica. I slid over a few inches to make room for



an elderly man to sit next to me. He was grateful for the seat and threw his arms around me without hesitation. We were about as different as two people could be, yet this day was about community and bridging the gaps of human nature. Religious leaders then spoke to the crowd, followed by prayer.

I forgot about the stale, 100-degree heat beating down on me, the cultural oddities and the long bus ride. I felt the spirit of a community, who suffered greatly just thirteen years ago, coming together once again to look after their own. I will carry a piece of Srebrenica with me throughout my life.

-Chan Braithwaite, 2008