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International

Blog

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IN THE COUNTRY – 2013 Peace March in Bosnia and Herzegovina

July 21, 2013

Brita Fernandez Schmidt, executive director of Women for Women in the UK, joined the [2013 Peace March in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#). The following is an extract from her blog, describing her experience and impression during the 120km long walk.

On the 7th July, I make my way from Sarajevo to Tuzla, with a group of supporters of Women for Women International and a group of Bosnian staff and Seida Saric, Women for Women International's country director, her brother in law and her two nieces, who have come from Norway to join the March for Peace, which will start in Nezuk tomorrow morning.

The March of Peace – Mars Mira – is a three-day walk from Nezuk near Tuzla to Srebrenica (120km). It takes place every year in July to commemorate the victims of the 1995 genocide. The route is the route followed by the refugees of the war as they tried to escape the massacre and over the years has attracted participants from all over the world.

On the first day of the march we start early and take our minibuses to Nezuk where people are gathering – everyone is really excited and we set off with the sun just coming out. There are many Bosnians who have come from abroad to join the march. Several television crews interview us, asking why we have come and we talk about how important it is to us to show solidarity and raise awareness of the genocide in Srebrenica in 1995 – to ensure we don't forget. Very early on we pass warnings of landmines, and they remind me of what it must have been like, when people were fleeing from Srebrenica – along the way we hear stories of how many people never made it because of the landmines.

This is in such stark contrast with the beauty of the countryside, which at times makes you forget why you are here and simply feel privileged to be walking in such beautiful surroundings. There are about 5,000 people doing the 3 day march – 120km – across the mountains. Local people are providing welcome breaks with warm tea or coffee, which even though it is about 26 degrees, is surprisingly refreshing.

The first day we are walking for 6 hours until we get to the first camp, where the majority of the walkers are staying. We are being hosted by one of the local women in Kamenica, Fatima Hrnjic, who welcomes us in her house and we hear from her, how the war has affected her and her husband – she fled early on during the war to Tuzla, which was a safe area. Many of her children went abroad and are still living abroad now. When she came back after the war, her house was completely destroyed and she and her husband had to spend all their money and time rebuilding it. They are struggling financially, because even though her husband has applied for his state pension a number of times, he has not been granted it and he does not understand why. Wherever we go, we hear stories of unemployment and poverty.

After a good rest, we set off again very early to join the march for the second day. I ask Elvir, our guide, whether I could walk with him and talk to him about his experience of the war. Elvir was 16 when he had to flee over the mountains. He left Srebrenica in a group of over 2,000 and when he arrived in Tuzla, which was a safe zone, after 78 days, he was one of 20. Some of his friends fell victims to landmines, others got ill, others were killed. His father and two brothers never made it. Talking to him we pass a secondary mass grave of over 500 bodies.



I ask Elvir how he thinks the country will be able to move forward from this horror. He is very clear – justice has not been done, the 100 war criminals who were sentenced by The Hague Tribunal is not enough. He asks me – how is it possible to kill 8,000 civilians in five days? He talks about the fact that many of his friends and their families know who killed their relatives and they see them every day going about their lives never having been held accountable for their actions. He looks at me and asks me – what would you do Brita? And that is of course what I have been asking myself all along – what would I do if I know who killed my family...

After my conversation with Elvir, I walk alone and think for a long time and I can see just how important it is to have justice, an acknowledgement of wrong doing. Just sweeping it under the carpet and hoping it will go away is just doing more harm and will never enable this beautiful country to move on.

Later in the evening I meet Doraja Eberle, the founder of Bauern Helfen Bauern ([Farmers Helping Farmers](#)), one of the few organisations who were in Bosnia during the war and are still here, helping and investing in this wonderful country and its people – and we both agree that it is unacceptable for the world to forget Bosnia, which is why our two organisations are supporting the Peace March and are raising funds to help the country.

Elvir's father and one of his brothers are already buried in Potocari at the memorial centre and this year the remains of his other brother have been found and will be buried on the 11th July during the annual memorial service. I cannot imagine what it must be like to have waited for 18 years to finally be sure that your brother has been killed and to bury him and to be able to say goodbye and grief. Elvir says his mother will not come to the funeral, because she cannot bear the pain. We see him after we arrive on the third day, carrying the coffin of his brother to the cemetery and some of us are there the next day for the funeral. There is so much grief and pain and Elvir and his family are one of 409 families who are burying a relative after all these years – and there are still nearly 3,000 missing!

Seeing 409 coffins being carried by the men who were marching with us from the factory building to the cemetery, makes that number real – it takes 2 hours of never ending coffins and so much grief, it is actually unbearable.

One of the people I meet along the march is a 20 year-old man who has been doing the Peace March for the last 5 years. His parents were killed in Srebrenica – so he never met them, he was only 1 year old. He tells me he does this march for his parents and he always weeps when he gets to Srebrenica because he never had a mother. His English is good, but he does not have a job and often asks himself what the sense is in living – but he tells me that he tries to be hopeful and make the best of what he has.

Some of the group also visit the rape centre which is next to the Potocari factory, the worst place I have ever seen, where you can see written on the wall the number of women that were raped every day – and you honestly ask yourself how is this possible? Where was humanity when this took place?

On the second and third night we stay at the home of Anesa Begic, who is burying her father this year. Wherever we go, there is a story of how the genocide has affected people. On the last day we pass abandoned houses with bullet holes and piles of clothes still visible inside.

The mood gets dark and sombre the closer we get to Srebrenica. At about 5km distance, we are all asked to stop in the clearing of a small forest. We all find a place to sit and wait. I take the opportunity to speak to the other members of my group, asking them about the past three days. Everyone has so much to say about this incredible experience. One thing that unites us all is the feeling that we have had the privilege to get to know this beautiful country and its history in a very special way and that we can see how much still needs to be done. We are all determined to do our bit to ensure that Bosnia is not forgotten.



And then the final 5km, everyone is exhausted, it is really hot now, but it is going downhill and soon we can see the rows of white gravestones at the Potocari Cemetery and Memorial – so many graves. And we walk until we are inside the Cemetery and the men go to the factory building across the road and start carrying the coffins into the cemetery.

It is really hard writing this all down, because I want to try and convey the sadness and the pain and suffering, but if you have not witnessed it yourself, it is hard to imagine. My thoughts are that with justice we create the opportunity for forgiveness, yet never forgetting, and ensuring that we all remind ourselves of our common humanity, sharing the suffering but also sharing the hope and working together to ensure that something like Srebrenica won't happen again.

I want to thank everyone who took part in the March and everyone who supported us – together we have been able to raise a phenomenal £30,000 all of which will go directly to [Women for Women International in Bosnia](http://www.womenforwomen.org). Thank you!



*If you are interested in joining us for the **March of Peace in 2014** or would like to find out more, please email Dani at dmason@womenforwomen.org. Participants do not need to be experienced trekkers but are encouraged to prepare for a daily walk of up to 40km and to have a moderate level of fitness.*