

## EPISODE 5 - Empowering through remembrance

**Adna Mujović (host)**

**Ehlimana Memišević**

**Almasa Salihović**

**Voiceover 00:06**

Hi, this is *To the Righthouse*. A new podcast series by the Global Campus of Human Rights, from skepticism to hope, from utopia to empathy. We discuss human rights riding waves, but also signaling where the light is. This podcast was recorded in Venice, Italy on the island of Lido, at the Global Campus headquarters.

**Adna Mujović 00:29**

Hello everyone, and thank you for tuning in to this episode of *Survivor Movements for Justice*, a podcast series hosted by Global Campus of Human Rights. I'm your very honored host today, Adna Mujović, and the topic is memorialization as a form of justice and recovery, as it appears in Boston and Herzegovina. This is a conversation I approach, not only as a host, but as someone shaped by these histories and by the responsibility to carry them carefully. So you can expect us to talk about collective memory, truth telling will also reflect on who gets included in these processes, who gets left out, and what justice can look like when it's pursued, not only in courts, but in communities. Joining me today are dear friends and colleagues, Almasa Salihović and Ehlimana Memišević. I'm deeply grateful to my guests for sharing their time, their insight and their trust. So I'd like to begin by asking each of you how you would like to introduce yourselves today, not just by title, but what we what feels most meaningful to share in this space. What would you like listeners to know about who you are and what brought you to this work, starting in no particular order? Oh, Almasa, go ahead.

**Almasa Salihović 01:44**

Thank you. Adna, very much. It's really my pleasure to be able to be here, to be part of this podcast. Usually, when somebody asks you to introduce yourself, you think that you know so much about yourself, but eventually, somehow the words just don't come up to your mind properly. But what I would like to say about myself by profession, I am a teacher of English Language and Literature, and before coming to the Sebian Memorial Center, where I am today, I was working in one small school, also on the territory of Republic state entity. And I think that's that was my first time when I met somebody who were fighting for their own rights, and those were the kids who are going to this very same school that but were denied their own language, their own history. So in a way, it was, you know, kind of introduction to what I might just end up doing what I'm doing today. So if I were to introduce myself now, I would first say that I'm a survivor of the Serbian genocide. That fact actually shapes everything else in my life. So, my professional roles matter, but they somehow count second I do this work because my life, because my family and my childhood were permanently changed by violence that the world now recognizes this as genocide. So what actually brought me here is responsibility. So I kind of say that I work so that memory does not depend only on those who are

still alive and who still carry it, and so that what happened is not just reduced to numbers or anniversaries. So maybe that could be the beginning of our conversation.

**Ehlimana Memišević** 03:37

Hello, everyone. It's a great honor and pleasure to be here with my great colleagues, Almasa and Adna when I come when it comes to introducing myself, I say at the first that I'm a professor of legal history and comparative law at the Faculty of Law University of Sarajevo. But on a more personal note, I often struggle to present myself to, and then I asked AI, a couple of months ago to give me like the third three words of based of myself, based on my previous inputs into the Chat GPT. And it comes with the scholars, survivor and storyteller, so from then on, I use it because it is in a nutshell who I am.

**Adna Mujović** 04:33

Thank you both. That immediately makes me think, was there a particular moment that you guys can recall when remembrance shifted from something deeply personal and inevitable and unavoidable, as you guys have shared, to something you felt compelled to engage with publicly.

**Almasa Salihović** 04:52

Well honestly, you know, somehow remembrance was something private. Until the moment when I grew up, and basically when we lived in the silence, in the in the family conversation, in absence, that was the memory realization, the memory for me while I was growing up. So it kind of shifted to public engagement when I realized that silence will not protect memory. Institutions and voices will do. So basically, when the denier, the denial became louder, what remembrance could no longer remain personal, you kind of start to speak for yourself. So maybe working for institution, where I am today, kind of it was like a eye opener why we need to share our stories, because eventually the stories of all survivors cannot be told without a survivor himself or herself. So, in that moment, I realized that my story was also important as a piece of this puzzle when it comes to the Srebrenica and those who survived the genocide in Srebrenica. So those, I can clearly say that voices of women were the ones that I grew up with, and that I basically am still working with them, with women, in particular as survivors. So I kind of might just say that basically they're the ones who starting specifically empowering what the young generations do and what I wanted also to be part of. So maybe when you realize that silence is not going to protect your memory, memory of your family or other families who survived and the people who were killed in genocide. That was the moment when I also decided to talk, and still continue to talk.

**Ehlimana Memišević** 06:53

Yes, if you notice, I first introduced myself by my professional, professional part of identity. This is how I started dealing with the memory, because I was deeply, as Almasa, deeply affected by the by the genocide and atrocities. I was born in a small town on Eastern board, on the border with Serbia and Eastern Bosnia called Visegrad. We are some of the most, most cruel atrocities were committed in in the beginning of the of spring 1992 including burning people alive on two different occasions. I was six at the time, and I was haunted by the experience ever, by the experiences of my family, of my neighbors and my fellow citizens ever since, but at the same time, I wanted to be perceived, not

as a victim, not as a person, as a child who lost father, home, hometown and everything, And then I needed to distance myself from this experience. So, for 25 years, I did not speak about my experiences. I did not, my close friends only knew that I was born in Visegrad, that I was expelled from my home, that I escaped to Goražde there and then after and I spent the whole war in besieged Goražde, and then came to Sarajevo, and that's it. And then I lost my father. They didn't know the details. And I kept it like that until I managed to build identity completely outside, completely separated from my experience and but I, I was constantly haunted by the need to fight for those who didn't survive, including my family members and the fellow citizen that brought me to a law faculty, law school. And all my work on, on in the in the field, in the field of law. But after I finished my, completed my PhD, then this urge to face with my with my experiences, and to be seen as who I actually am not this university professor, completely separated from the experiences was so overwhelming that I that that is then when I realized that I really need to face with it, even though I was so afraid, and to integrate this, this experience into my work and into Who I am right now. So, in my case, my approach to remembers was first public and then became personal, and it took me 25 years. So, it started just a couple of years ago openly that I really changed, that I really shared, or all that I shared with you right now.

**Adna Mujović** 10:06

Well, thank you for being willing to share that with us today. You guys have described yourselves as survivors, and also members of your family fell victim to the genocide. What does it mean to honor victims and survivors without freezing them in that label? You know? How do Memorial practices from both of your fields navigate that tension?

**Almasa Salihović** 10:33

Well, I usually start talking from the point of view of the Srebrenica Memorial Center and the practices that we actually have here. So for us, honoring the victims means recognizing their full humanity, not only how they died, but especially how they lived. So Memorial practice, the Srebrenica Memorial, must show people not this number, but as individuals, with the names, with the families, with the dreams, with relationships, from the very beginning of the childhood until the moment that they basically died, they were killed in genocide. So, the goal here is not to trap them in the moment of violence, but to restore dignity that violence tried to erase. So, I firmly believe that, you know, in this official narrative, usually people refer to the people who were killed in genocide as victims, and the focus is mostly on the death. So, in the Memorial Center, of course, we honor them because they were killed as innocent human beings. But we also through many exhibitions, through whether it is a video testimonies of the survivors, or some exhibitions that are dedicated specifically to those who were killed, either by being separated in Potočari, here at the UN headquarters at the time, or if they have been captured at the death march route while they were trying to find the way to free territory. We are trying to tell their story, not just of survival, but of their life, basically. So it is very much important for us that every victim should just connect themselves to the people in the sense, not the moments of their defining moments of the victims on their lives as well. We had so many people who were teachers, who were engineers, who were medical staff. We had so many people who were at the beginning of their studies, but they came back when the war broke out. And we had so many children killed in the genocide. So we're trying through the survivors and through what was left behind

them, but whether those things were found discovered in the mass graves with them, with their basically personal as their personal belongings, or whether something was brought to the free territory by the family members who survived, usually the mothers, the wives. So, we're trying to basically through every single artifacts, every single item, to tell the story of a person who was once very much alive, full of life, full of dreams, hopes. And basically we're trying to portray here a community of the Bosniaks, usually Bosniaks who once existed but no longer exist in that form that we want them to be remembered. So, we're trying to portray not just those people through the numbers, but to show the community who had heritage, who had tradition, the language, the customs. So we are basically are trying to tell the whole story. Yes, the biggest part is to bring them here, basically as identified victims of the genocide so that they can have the final and eternal peace at the strands Memorial Center cemetery. But the fact is that we are trying to through the memorial practices to show what was their life and what kind of people they might have become if they were still alive and among us.

**Ehlimana Memišević** 14:06

I can also speak from my own experiences. I mentioned in the previous answer to the previous question that I struggled with being victimized, and that is the reason I didn't want to share my experience for 25 years. So now I'm trying to share what was the problematic in victimization, in the in the how people were looking at me, that I didn't like, that I despise, actually. So what I what I realized is that it is very necessary to listen to the survivors, not speak for them, not impose your own conclusions or approaches or views how they should understand their own experiences, how should they feel about their own experiences, is that, just listen to them and like acknowledge their agency. In that regard, like survivors that some of the survivors that I know are some of the most strong fungus and resilient people, and if you take away that from them, it is very it is very problematic. In that regard, listening is the key and creating safe space for them to share their own experiences and how they how they live with those experiences is the key to really honoring the dignity and the humanity both of their loved ones, victims and their and the survivors.

**Adna Mujović** 15:53

Thank you for that. Yeah, memorialization is often described as for survivors, but not always with them or involving them. So, thank you for giving us an idea of what truly participatory memorialization looks like in practice and Ehlimana maybe we start with you with this question, since you have encountered it yourself, do you ever encounter continue to encounter resistance within the communities themselves? You know, fatigue silence or a desire to just move on. And yeah, how do you deal with that without without judgment, of course.

**Ehlimana Memišević** 16:29

yes, I cannot deal with that without judgment, because I'm very frustrated when, when that pressure is put on the victims and survivors. Because in my own view, it is continuation of that humanization of them. We often hear from the survivors themselves or the fellow citizens that it is necessary to move on, it is necessary to look into the future. It is necessary to get over the past. But as I said in the previous response, victims and survivors actually moved on. They managed to rebuild their lives from the scratches, they managed to rebuild their lives after unimaginable sufferings. But if you then

ask from them to move on, it means, it means that you ask for them, from them to forget that they used to have their homes, that they used to have their family members, that they used to have lives that were that were not shut like destroyed, etc. So in my view, like asking from them is first of all, relativization and trivialization and denial of their, of their sufferings and their experiences. But at the same time it is, it is renewed dehumanization, because what, and silencing, because what we asked from them is not is the level above humane, it's, it's to forget that you once had wives and family members. It is not how you move on and reconcile. It is how you silence the victims.

**Adna Mujović** 18:33

Almasa anything to add to that,

**Almasa Salihović** 18:36

Yeah, basically, I would really agree with what said, basically, sometimes, sometimes trauma, they can just lead to exhaustion or just basically a wish to move on. As said, yes, the survivors, they moved on, but they need to carry the message with them. There are people who still cannot speak publicly about that. There are still people who you know cannot deal with their own trauma, or people that bringing all that up again is not going to bring any good for them or for the people who are listening or to that this will have any sort of, you know, impact on the people. That's why we just basically need to have the platforms that will offer to survivors, you know, to tell their story, to show the empathy, not judgment. So because basically everybody carries memory differently, so our role is not to pressure people to speak, but to ensure that the space remains open for, when the people are ready for it. And of course, that as Ehlimana said, you know, some people will just say, sometimes it just may feel offensive if somebody tell you. Should move on. That means basically that you need to just get rid of the paths that you still carry with you, without the acknowledgement of what you've been suffering, what you've been going through. And why is it important for a person who survived to be listened and their stories to be just told to the people into the audience that might just feel the change and be the change actually.

**Adna Mujović** 20:30

Yeah, in that regard, if listeners are asking themselves how to engage with remembrance responsibly, what would you invite them to be attentive to or cautious about whether it be in the context of Bosnia or elsewhere.

**Ehlimana Memišević** 20:51

Should I start? very quickly, I would always suggest people to listen to the survivors and their own needs. As Almasa said, everybody deals with their own memories and experiences individually, so you really need to listen to the person in order to know what they need, or they often need only listening so and as I previously said, not impose on them on how they should feel about their experiences, how they should navigate their lives, etc. It is very important to just listen and then try, together with the, with the person, to figure out what can be done to help.

**Almasa Salihović** 21:51

Yeah, I couldn't agree more. Basically, for those who did not live through the violence, they just have a responsibility to learn, to acknowledge and to defend the truth along with the survivors. So what they should not do is place the emotional labor or education on survivors, or expect survivors to constantly relive through their traumas for other people's understanding. So they should kind of be able to listen, more than to just expose survivors to something that they cannot say or that they cannot share at that point. So in a way, we need more empathy and more people who can just basically listen and not maybe the attack is not the good choice of words, of a word, but basically just totally judging in a way, or giving their own opinion on how a person or survivor should tell their story on, or how much in quantity they should share or not with, with the audience that is willing to listen.

**Adna Mujović** 22:56

Yeah, and you two are speaking to, you know, individual levels too, and people engaging with survivor stories, which is extremely important, because sometimes when you engage with just the facts or the timelines, it becomes diluted. And Ehlimana is the word you use, dehumanize too. When you reduce people to these numbers, when you look to your you know, honestly, not even just your fellow Bosnians, but beyond, what does solidarity look like on a grander scale, beyond just symbolic gestures or acknowledging anniversaries, what does that actual continued solidarity look like, of course, beyond just continuing education and the listening.

**Almasa Salihović** 23:48

Should I? Should I go first? Okay, so well for me, real solidarity means standing against denial. You know, supporting survival led initiatives defending Memorial space or spaces when they're attacked or undermined. So it means showing up when, it means showing up when it's not inconvenient, not only when it is visible. So of course, when it comes to the survivors, or when it comes to the story about genocide or other crimes in Bosnia Herzegovina, usually people remember it, or they solidify with on the actual days of the anniversaries, on the actual dates. And eventually, when all of that passes, it's, you know, irrelevant for the people who survived. We need to, you know, constantly be at some point is in focus. So in a way, you know, solidarity for us is like being included in educational institutions, not just once per year or twice per year. Year, but basically throughout the whole year, to have some sort of activities that will remind younger generations and the outer public to be involved in remembrance and to be, you know, with the survivors included basically in everything that they are going through, not just in one moment, one day per year, on anniversaries, but in a way to be, you know, to be present whenever we need to speak about, not just about the genocide disturbance, but when it comes to talking about women, about the children who survived, about women who were raped in the previous war. So they need to be present in in everything that we're talking about for throughout the whole year, we need to be present somewhere else as well, on other platforms. And for that, for me, that means, you know, to be in solidarity with the survivors. Many, many days throughout the year, and not just on individual level, but on institutional level. We can still do so much more, rather than to just rely on the institutions of memorialization, such as Srebrenica Memorial Center, but we need to just basically, as a lot of people tend to say Trevor and say is not just the tragedy of the people who actually survived and who were killed in the genocide itself, but this is a collective tragedy of the whole nation, governor to governance. That's why we need to be

present at any point, not just on the 11th of July, or when it comes to theater on 20th July, or any other dates on 16th of April now which but basically to be present throughout the whole year, in schools, in institutions, in museums, and maybe even on the televisions, as in the media in general, so that we can, at that point say yes, we are, as a society, included in all of the memorialization, not just on certain data and anniversaries.

**Ehlimana Memišević** 27:10

Maybe this is my professional deformation, but I really need to say, and I cannot stress enough, the importance of education. We need to educate ourselves constantly about the atrocities committed, including genocide, and I think that would guide us to how to fight for justice and against denial and even glorification and celebration of genocide and war crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That is what Almasa said, that it is very, very necessary. It's necessary for to fight against denial and celebration and having the in mind the intensity of denial and glorification of genocide and war crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this is, in my, my opinion, the most pressing, pressing issue is like fighting for memory, fighting for remembrance of the facts that were written in those court records, that were written in the testimonies, but people tend to forget. So, this is like the meticulous work in front of all of us constantly reminding of the facts, and for that, we need to constantly educate ourselves,

**Adna Mujović** 28:39

Very well put, because collective memory is often spoken about as a symbolic or some moral work, but it can actually function as a form of justice. And I was wondering if you guys could speak more specifically to how you've seen that play out, especially when legal justice might feel partial or delayed or absent, absent, what specific role is remembrance playing, against this?

**Almasa Salihović** 29:10

Sorry, could you specify a little bit more with the question?

**Adna Mujović** 29:13

Yeah, sure, beyond, just, beyond just, you know, solidarity remembrance is specifically like institutionalizing memory, I believe may act as a form of justice when justice is otherwise not being carried out by legal systems. And so, I was wondering, because you two have specific angles at which you're approaching, professionally, of course, and personally, how, examples of how you've seen, of how you've seen that remembrance actually playing a more important role.

**Almasa Salihović** 29:53

We have many, many, basically, many crimes that still wait for the people to be accountable for. I have so many places around Srebrenica that are not specifically related to the dates in July in 1995. We have so many, that were the war crimes that were committed in 1993 and we do not have, still a legal justice when it comes to that. We have witnesses, but we do not have the trials. We do not have the people who are accountable for that. So in that sense, I think that remembering and solidarity, all those people who survived and are not specifically connected to these specific crimes committed in Srebrenica or around for example, we do have on 12th of April that we commemorate

on the school playground in Srebrenica those who were killed, and most of them were young people, and they were killed by two grenades fired from the nearby towns. We do not have trials for that. We do not have anybody accountable for that. We have so many witnesses, and we have people who survived the very same wounded, but survived this very same act. But eventually, I try to imagine, what if we just relied on those crimes to commemorate them, if they only have the verdicts, how many of such victims would never be mentioned even, or how many heard from what happened before those crimes that were committed in 1995, or at some point in 1992 elsewhere in the Bosnia and Herzegovina. So it is very much important to realize and not just to rely on the of course, we need to rely always on the legal facts, because that's something that we can still count on when it comes to education, always educating young generations and just basically reminding them the facts are the one the things that are the most important, however, for somebody who survives and for the community that is damaged, good, basically, it is very much important to remember even those crimes, and especially the victims who were killed in some of the crimes that will never have somebody who is going to be guilty for. So for that matter, memorialization and distance is very much important, just to remind always that so many, let's say, small, war crimes go under the radar just only because they do not have illegal form. So that's why I can constantly, you know, whenever I can as a member of the Srebrenica Memorial Center, whenever I can go to these memorialization types of memory, let's call them this way, just to at least commemorate and be part of something that does not go so much online or in the media, but just basically the vast majority of people will never hear in this world. So I think it's very important, and they are not least important than those victims who have somebody to blame for their death.

#### **Ehlimana Memišević** 33:26

Thank you so much, Almasa for bringing this out. This is something that I also wanted to point out. There is the difference between or not difference, but we need to differentiate because between judicial truth, which is the truth established by the court records, and historical truth. And our main work as survivors and as scholars is on the historical truth, because we, I, and all of us, know that prosecutions and the legal process, even if they are successful, they are they can be very flawed. It is very hard to reach these judicial standard of proving so a lot of things and a lot of atrocities, like goes under the radar as you, as you said, or never come to the prosecution. We now deal with the fact that that the perpetrators and victims and witnesses are dying. It is 30 years after the war. So many, many perpetrators will not face justice. That is, that is truth. So, the main work for us is work is establishing and working on the on the historical truth. And for that reason, memory is very important, but also for fighting for justice in general, because in the face of continuation of denial and glorification, that is, that feels like, like the only what is left to us to fight for the memory, because we are fighting for acknowledgement that these people existed, who were killed. That is the bare minimum what we are dealing with right now, and that is why the like memory and memorialization is important. It is basically the only tool, sometimes that is left to as a tool of to justice.

#### **Adna Mujović** 35:56

Yeah, how much, how much acknowledgement or time or platform do you even give to the act of denial? Is it worth it? Or do you continue, as you, as you to say, establishing this memory.

**Almasa Salihović 36:13**

We try to, when it comes to the denial, deniers and the actual denial, it is important to document it somehow. But for us, it is not really good to give any sort of platform to the people who deny genocide in Srebrenica. We are witnesses that basically, most of the deniers today are the leading politicians when it comes to the if we talk about the entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as Republic of Srpska, you know, most of the leading politicians come as deniers. Of course, the neighboring Republic of Serbia as well, and some other countries in the region have some, certain individuals and of course, the media platforms that deny genocide and give the platform to the deniers of the genocide in Srebrenica, are not just deniers of the genocide is reference, but deniers of other crimes that were committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina in general. So as for Srebrenica Memorial, we tend to give this genocide denials report. It's an annual issue. So we, so far, we have been dealing with for six years now, and we just give basically these deniers, this is their only platform, just to be documented and to be put onto 10 of them, like we have the chart to the scale of the 10 top 10 deniers. We call them when it comes in the public space, referring not in on the social media, because that would be a vast majority of the people should be dealing with just going through the harmful and shameful comments that deny genocide in Srebrenica, some profile from and, we cannot just basically see if these are the real profiles of the real people, or somebody hiding behind some other names or hashtag. But basically we support the fact giving the platform to the survivors, to the people, to the scholars, survivors, to the people, researchers who want to share the stories of the crimes in Bosnia Herzegovina, to the wild world, so that it can have a meaning. And the meaning is just basically to be educational tool, so that people can actually kind of see what sort of hateful speech and what hate actually brought at least this part of the country, what it brought to these people here. So that's why giving platform to the deniers, for me personally, it is a just giving them the ability to share their own personal opinions, their voices and to be heard. And it's not just about them telling that. It is how many people will actually share their own opinion and how many of them will be encouraged by the people who are the power at this point in this country, so they can, regardless whether they're good or bad, they're always the role models for the people in Bosnia Herzegovina. So for me, giving the platform to the deniers will also give the possibility to young people to go with the same way. And for me, this is the real danger. It is not in the minds of those who committed the genocide or who committed the crimes or who would commit it again, unfortunately. But danger lies in the young minds that can be brainwashed, they basically can be, you know, led to a way that will unfortunately lead again to misunderstanding, to hate, to division, to basically not accepting how much different and yet how similar we are in this country. So for me, the real danger is giving the platform to the deniers is giving the possibility, for the young people just basically to have these people as role models, which is something that we just so perfectly want to avoid.

**Ehlimana Memišević 40:11**

I would just like to add that it is very important not to give platform to deniers, because that that would be the way to legitimize their views, but having in mind the threats that they pose to the society and the truth and memory, we need to expose them. And that is exactly what Srebrenica Memorial does with this. With these yearly, how do you call it? Reports on genocide denial, serving the genocide denial we witness already the destructiveness of denial because it is, it is widespread and it is

normalized, so the amount of the level of normalization of denial and celebration of genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina is record high in the in the last couple of decades. So that is the reason we need to expose deniers. We don't need to engage, we don't need to engage in what they are saying to dismiss or to prove that it is not true. No, this is not the work of people who combat denial, but exposure is very important. So that is, that is, I think, the main focus that we need, that we need to have just expose deniers, say what they like document what they are saying, but not engaging in proving that they are lying that it is not true, etc, because that is why that is the way we legitimize their views.

**Adna Mujović** 41:55

I have the very unfortunate role of wrapping this conversation up, but I appreciate you both also in reminding us that remembrance is not a guarantee in any which way, neither of healing nor of justice, especially as you both point out now, when mass violence and the denial thereof continues to unfold in the presence, in the present, often with familiar patterns and familiar silences. What remembrance can offer though, what you both teach us is a refusal, this refusal of erasure, of denial and of the expectation that survivors carry memory alone. There are many of us who can acknowledge what happened and also be extremely moved and can share in carrying this forward. Today's conversation reminds us that memorialization is also not only about the past, it is about how we choose to live with what happened and how we listen to those who survived it. So thank you once again, Ehlimana . Almasa, and thank you to the Global Campus of human rights for hosting a platform for this conversation. Tune in next time