

# Hatidža Mehmedović and the Mothers of Srebrenica



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Hatidža's husband and sons were murdered alongside more than 8,000 men and boys at the genocidal massacre in Srebrenica. In 2002, Hatidža founded the Mothers of Srebrenica to ensure their killers were brought to justice.



*'No story can bring back our dearest ones, but by telling a story we can prevent new genocides, new crimes and future wars.'*

Hatidža at the graves of her sons at the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial  
Photograph from Remembering Srebrenica

Hatidža Mehmedović (pronounced hah-tih-jah meh-meh-tow-ich) was a Bosnian Muslim born in 1952. She made her home between the southern towns of Srebrenica and Potočari with her husband Abdullah, who worked as an electrician at the Centre of Culture in Srebrenica. Together they had two sons; Azmir was born in 1974 and Almir three years later in 1977.

At the time, Bosnia was one of six republics in the state of Yugoslavia. The population of Bosnia consisted of Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats. In the early 1990s, Yugoslavia disintegrated into six states when nationalist parties began to gain power in the republics. When Bosnia declared independence in 1992, it soon descended into war.

Thousands of Bosnian Muslims were forced to flee their homes and sought safety in Srebrenica. They were in need of food, medical supplies and protection from the attacking Bosnian Serb Army. In March 1993, Commander of the United Nations (UN) Protection Force, General Philippe Morillon, accompanied an aid convoy into Srebrenica. The attacks stopped as Morillon arrived. Hatidža took a prominent role in a blockade, made up of women and children, to prevent Morillon from leaving Srebrenica, believing the attacks would start again if he left. Morillon promised to 'never abandon' Srebrenica and, in April 1993, it was declared a 'safe area' by the UN.

However, Srebrenica remained under siege and the 'safe area' proved unenforceable. Two years later, on 11 July 1995, Bosnian Serb troops and paramilitaries led by General Ratko Mladić descended on the town of Srebrenica and began shelling it. Realising they were in danger, many men and boys from the town ran to the woods to escape. Hatidža was separated from her husband and sons as they tried to flee.

'We were standing there and my young one, Lalo — that's what we called him, although his name was Almir — was saying, 'Go on, mother, go, leave, already' as he was pulling me closer and closer, and would not let me go.'

Hatidža was put on a bus and taken to a town called Kladanj. She was later told by the Red Cross that her sons and husband were missing.

Hatidža later discovered that her husband, Abdullah, and her eldest son, Azmir, were killed together by a firing squad. Azmir was 21 years old at the time. Her youngest son, Almir, tried to hide from his killers but was discovered and murdered; he was 18 years old. Hatidža's two brothers, Edhem and Hamed were also murdered. Her two elder sisters survived.

'We thought we'd see each other in two, three days. We did not know they'd kill them all'.

More than 8,000 Muslim men, and boys over 12 years old, were murdered in Srebrenica. After the war, Hatidža lived in a suburb of Sarajevo. In 2002, she was one of the first survivors to return to Srebrenica, to the home she'd made with her husband and sons, in order to feel close to them. Before the outbreak of the war, Almir had planted three trees on the garden of their family home. He'd also written his name in the setting concrete at the front door.

'If I didn't have such beloved memorial pieces, I would often think that it was only a dream that I had children.'

In 2002, she founded The Mothers of Srebrenica, an activist group. It represents 6,000 women who lost family members in the genocide at Srebrenica. The group aimed to advocate for justice and raise donations for the survivors. In 2007 they filed civil lawsuits against the UN and the Dutch government for failing to protect people in Srebrenica. In April 2012, the UN was ruled to be 'immune' to prosecution and the Dutch government was found to be responsible for the deaths of 300 people.

The Mothers of Srebrenica also campaigned to establish a memorial to the people murdered in Srebrenica, and to identify the bodies and give them proper burials. Nearly 100 mass graves were discovered and exhumed around Srebrenica. The remains of those who had been murdered were scattered across multiple grave sites in a deliberate attempt by Bosnian Serb forces to impede their identification. Many remains are yet to be identified.

The Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery was opened in 2003 by US President Bill Clinton. In 2010, Hatidža was finally able to bury the remains of her husband and sons there, not far from the area she had last seen them fifteen years earlier. All that was found of Azmir were two small leg bones.

'I am a woman who lives in Srebrenica alone. I am a woman that once had a husband. I am a mother that gave birth to two sons. But I have no one anymore. I go to bed alone and I wake up alone. I gave birth to children who played, went to school, who laughed, yet all I had to bury were just two bones.'

In September 2010 Philippe Morillon visited the memorial site. In a mirroring of the blockade to stop him leaving in 1993, female survivors forced him out of the memorial site. Hatidža publicly stated 'He did not have the right to enter the cemetery where our children were buried thanks to him.'

Hatidža died aged 65, on 22 July 2018 at a hospital in Sarajevo. She had been ill with breast cancer for a long time. Despite her illness, she travelled to The Hague to see General Mladić sentenced to life imprisonment after being convicted in November 2017 of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, over 22 years after her family were murdered and in the final months of her life.

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Genocide in Bosnia: [hmd.org.uk/bosnia](https://hmd.org.uk/bosnia)

Life stories of those affected by genocide: [hmd.org.uk/lifestories](https://hmd.org.uk/lifestories)

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