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SARAJEVO

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Srebrenica is not a Metaphor  
– The Significance of the Srebrenica  
Memorial Center - Potočari for  
Understanding Genocide –

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## Abstract

*The author will emphasize the importance of both the existence and the further development of the Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center, in the context of the continued need to understand the genocide that took place in and around Srebrenica, from the aspect of building a culture of remembrance throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). This is necessary in order to continue fighting the ongoing genocide denial. At first glance, a culture of remembrance presupposes immobility and focus on the past to some, but it is essentially dynamic, and connects three temporal dimensions: it evokes the present, refers to the past but always deliberates over the future. In this paper, the emphasis is placed on the concept of the place of remembrance, the lieu de memoire as introduced by the historian Pierre Nora. In this sense, a place of remembrance such as the Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center is an expression of a process in which people are no longer just immersed in their past but read and analyze it in the present. Furthermore, looking to the future, they also become mediators of relations between people and communities, which in sociological theory is an important issue of social relations. The author of this paper emphasizes that collective memory in the specific case of genocide in and around Srebrenica is only possible when the social relations around the building (Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center) crystallize, which is then much more than just the content of the culture of remembrance.*

*Keywords: social relations, genocide, the culture of remembrance, places of remembrance, Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center, Srebrenica*

*“Conscious forgetting prolongs exile, the secret of salvation is memory”*

*(Jewish proverb)*

## Introduction

An overview of the organized nurturing a society's culture of remembrance, is most often followed through ideological and institutional ways of its transmission. Although it is more extensive in its content, the culture of remembrance determines the historical culture, that is, how society looks at its past. It is a constantly changing whole that is formed under the influence of many factors.

One of these factors is the phenomenon of accelerating history (Nora, 2007), which clearly reveals the distance between true memory, social and intact, embodied in societies just like B&H, and which disappears with them. The culture of remembrance, as a way to which all societies organize their past, is doomed to

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oblivion because they are driven by accelerated change. Memory and history are not synonymous, they are largely opposed (Nora, 2007:137).

Memory is life, it is always transmitted by living people and that is why it is in constant evolution, open to the dialectic of memories and forgetfulness; often unconsciously, constantly distorted; sensitive to all appropriations, manipulations, and denials; subject to long dormancy and sudden revivals. On the other hand, the way of historical perception changes and expands, especially with the help of the media and daily politics, so that memory, once a legacy of an intimate experience, is replaced by an “ephemeral membrane of actuality” (Nora, 2007). In other words, dictated by the need for contemporary relevance, serious topics and issues are simplified and trivialized, including the culture of remembrance. According to Nora, “so much is said about memory precisely because it no longer exists” (Nora, 2007:23). Therefore, in a general sense, this paper is a kind of call for a fuller and more serious awareness of Bosnian society about itself.

Furthermore, the study of *lieux de memoire*, places of remembrance, and in the specific case of this paper, the Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center, defines both the meaning and importance of understanding the genocide committed in 1995 in and around Srebrenica. This paper seeks to actualize the importance of the Memorial Center and emphasize the need for an adequate cultural policy that will place this specific object of memory, with its support, directly in the context of directing the development of comprehensive social relations in society with emphasis on their moral and educational transformation.

### Cultures of remembrance - a link between past, present, and future

At first glance, memory seems to be something exclusively internal, ‘stuck’ in the past, the memory of something that happened in the past, and remains thus, frozen in time. However, when we consider it more closely, it emerges as a dynamic process that connects three temporal dimensions. Evoked in the present, it remembers the past but always thinks about the future. In this context, it is important to emphasize two types of memory: *communicative memory*, which refers to the transmission of memory in everyday life, and the *culture of remembrance*, which is objectified, institutionalized and thus transmitted and reincarnated through generations. The culture of remembrance is formed by symbolic heritage, shaped in texts, monuments, ceremonies, customs, objects, and other media that serve as mnemonic triggers to initiate meaning about what actually happened (Assmann, 2012). Furthermore, the culture of remembrance ‘restores time’, crystallizes the collective experience of the past, and presupposes knowledge rather than assumptions. It consists of cultural content and practical patterns; which people learn to decode and place in their own identity. Sociologically speaking, it is a social and integrative vision of the past that individuals interpret, change and

communicate in the self-vision of themselves and their own group, in a different, but still similar way (Kuljić, 2006:9). It is not only a passive reflection of culture and politics but also the creator of the culture, beliefs, and values of public and private life.

Studies of cultures of remembrance analyze mechanisms of social transmission, shaping, maintenance, and processing of the past and develops approaches to the study of collective and individual images of the past. It is now understood that cultures of memory are created by people and groups in certain situations, in order to interpret the present with the help of the past and create a constructive character of future development. In other words, cultures of remembrance are a part of the general culture of every society and are closely connected with socially integrative, cohesive, and practical-technical knowledge, skills, and various forms of artistic shaping. The continuity of ‘social images of oneself’ is established by a culture of remembrance that also gives a horizon of meaning and time (Assmann, 2012). The past can also be seen as a platform for interpreting problems in the present, and according to Misztal, the comparison of past and present events gives the collective memory a strategic character, when it comes to influencing the present (Misztal in: Kuljić, 2006:18). Cultures of memory presume of human and social relations, which actively influence both conflicts and cooperation, and reconciliation between people.

An organized culture of remembrance is not just a mere collection of experiences from the past however. Its important function is to structure the results of communication activities through which the group or society as a whole determines its own relationship to the world and itself. Memory brings the contents of the past into a meaningful order, establishes harmony in the acceptance and interpretation of the world (Kuljić, 2006), but not only by preserving certain contents, but also by forgetting others and fighting against denial of war events or war crimes around the world, Holocaust denial and denial genocide in and around Srebrenica.

### *Lieu de memoire* – a place of remembrance

According to Kuljić two perspectives intersect when researching cultures of remembrance in their broadest sense. The first, is centered around the individual, who asks about the motives and contexts of individual memory. The other perspective, the macro perspective also emerges, which explores We explore Nora’s *lieux de memoire* from a macro perspective. According to this significant author, the study of places of memory is located at the crossroads of two currents that define its importance and significance. On the one hand, the historiographical movement: the reflexive return of history to itself, and on the other hand, it is a historical movement in the true sense of the word that marks the end of a tradition of memo-

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ry (Nora, 2007:142). The time of the site of remembrance represents exactly this moment - in which the infinite capital we have lived in the intimacy of remembrance disappears and revives only under the gaze of re-established history in the place of remembrance. Places of remembrance are first and foremost remnants, the ultimate form in which commemorative consciousness survives in a history that needs remembrance, because it has renounced it itself. The de-ritualization of the world has given rise to the notion of *lieu de memoire*, and it is precisely the art and desire of societies, carried away by their transformation and renewal, that produces, raises, establishes, constructs, determines and sustains these places (Nora, 2007:143). Society, according to its own nature, values the new against the old, youth before old age, the future before the past. Museums, archives, graves, cemeteries, art, and other collections, associations, private associations, are all, according to Nora - remnants of another age, or as he puts it, “privileged refuges”. In a contemporary context, the disappearance of sincere memory as a ‘lived present’ means that our view of July 11 that must be neither naive nor indifferent. It is a memory that torments us and that is no longer ours, as Nora emphasizes, a memory between rapid desacralization and the temporary return of holiness. A fall from memory into the historical, from one world in which we had ancestors, into a world of only a contingent relationship with what made us, is the moment in which places of memory occur.

All approaches to memory, historical or scientific, whether relating to national memory or social mentalities, deal with *realia* (lat.), things relevant to practical, everyday life, dealing with realities, real knowledge, and totality of facts, trying to grasp in their most vivid reality (Nora, 2007:164). Unlike the objects of history, *lieux de memoire*, places of memory, have no referent in reality. They are their own referent, signs that point to themselves, signs in a pure state. But this does not mean that they are without a content, physical presence, or without history - quite the opposite. Places of memory are at the same time material, symbolic and functional, and they differ only in the levels and the ways in which these meanings are present (Nora, 2007:36). Pierre Nora believes that the place of memory is created precisely by the relationship of the game between memory and history. Thus, he points out that in the beginning, it is necessary to have a will, that is, an intention to remember. On the other hand, he emphasizes that without the intervention of history, time, and change, one should be satisfied with a simple history of memorials. He claims that places of memory are in fact “hybrids” or a “solid intertwining of life and death, time and eternity, a spiral of collective and individual, prosaic and sacred, constant and changeable” (Nora, 2007:37). The fundamental purpose of a place of memory, he states, is the stopping of time, the fixation of the state of things, the materialization of the immaterial in order to gather the maximum meaning in a minimum of signs, but at the same time he

emphasizes that places of memory live only from their “ability to transform”, i.e. in “continuous renewal of meaning” (ibid.).

But what makes them places of remembrance is exactly what eludes history. They are according to Nora, *templum*. Intersection within the continuum of the profane, space or time, or both, the circle within which everything is important, symbolizes everything and means everything (Nora, 2007). In this sense, the place of memory’s role is twofold, even plural: it is a place of abundance closed in on itself, defined by its identity and summed up in its name, and at the same time, open to an infinite range of all possible meanings.<sup>1</sup>

## Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center as a Contact Zone in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Social Relations

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Michel Foucault describes the role of institutions in which testimony takes place as archives where the first law of what can be said, is a system that marks the appearance of statements as exceptional events. However, the archive is also what determines that all uttered things do not accumulate infinitely in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in unbreakable linearity, nor are they left to the will of random external accidents, but events are grouped together into different figures, created together in a plane with different relationships, sustainable or foggy, according to specific regularities and circumstances (Foucault, 1998). According to Foucault, all this determines what defines the way a statement-thing happens, and it is a question of the nature of the system, and its functioning. Far from unifying everything that is uttered in some whisper of discourse, far from being the only thing that allows us to exist in the midst of preserved discourses, it is right to differentiate discourses into numerous existences and specify their duration (Foucault 1998:145-146).

However, considering the sites of remembrance from the aspect of the so-called ‘contact zones’ revolves around the notion of an institution in modern society and responsibility of an institutional place of remembrance as such, with its authority and legitimacy, to “works for the betterment of society and its development”

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1 In this particular case, I consulted the most relevant theoretical research on memorial centers, which is related to the main questions: how to achieve ethical transformation through activities, exhibitions, or other reference contents; how to change the understanding of self, others, and the world and how to deepen a sense of responsibility according to the suffering of others. A vulnerability that is presented in memorial centers is, according to many theorists (Holocaust museologists, for example), when it comes to the contents of “difficult topics” (Difficult Matters), which could contribute to the ethical transformation of society. However, vulnerability still has a ‘negative’ connotation in terms of the weakness of the spirit and character of individuals, groups, and even an entire nation. Furthermore, the concept of ‘Difficult Matters’ is still insufficiently researched in the museological theoretical sense, and the works of Swedish sociologists and museologists remain predominant.

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(Tinning, 2017). Questions are often asked about how institutions communicate with society or learn from it, how they represent the past, and what can be learned in them. The postmodernist view of places of memory deals with questions of truth and knowledge. In this particular case, there is truth and knowledge about the genocide in and around Srebrenica and how to respond to political, cultural, and social challenges and difficulties when it comes to understanding the genocide in and around Srebrenica. My thesis refers to the re-invention of the institution of the Memorial Centre in Potočari, from a place of remembrance to a public educational institution, with an emphasis on strengthening its role in society. Furthermore, when it comes to memorial centers and museums, it is important to emphasize that at the center of the world's major debates, is thinking about responsibility for social inclusion, the emphasis on the discussion of 'difficult topics' (Difficult Matters), with an emphasis on the visibility of the "invisible" in relation to prevent forgetting and denial of the heinous crimes against man and humanity. In terms of the perception of the Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center as an educational institution, it is important to keep in mind the fact that it is evolving into a presupposing form of critical pedagogy. The development of this centre should further be included within the cultural policy at the level of the entire state of B&H, which it currently does not t. It is known that cultural policy, which includes a culture of remembrance, more the precisely support *lieux de memoire*, or places of memory, and is a picture and expression of the general social situation. Consequently, it can not be different from the political situation in the country. B&H is a glaring example, where the consequences of the long-standing social, political, and economic crisis are most often visible permeating the cultural sphere.

In giving preference to museums or memorial centers as 'places of remembrance where learning happens', leading museological theorist Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, seeks to prioritize an approach to social constructivism that becomes the most influential formula in museum memorial practice, by assuming the cognitive aspect over the emotional one. This approach, as discussed in this paper (with adequate cultural policy or not) implies accepting a constructivist approach to knowledge and learning, which means recognizing the fact that institutions of memory have the potential to negotiate cultural boundaries and constraints, and create contact zones where identities, exhibitions artifacts, people, and objects can reveal new opportunities for personal and social life, for the democratization of society (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999:24).

According to another and equally important theorist in this field, Paul Williams, memorial museums are particularly useful in a political sense, since they concretize and refine the event being remembered. By initiating discussion of sensitive topics, which exist in personal memories, books, movies, websites, etc., political activism is created and interpreted through the physical memorial museum.

They should be homes of debates that would otherwise be ‘homeless’ (Williams, 2011:233). In other words, memorial centers strengthen our knowledge of the past, help in understanding and constructing identities, transforming our relationship to community, society, state, and with some luck, make us ‘better people’.

The Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center<sup>2</sup> is a *lieu de memoire* for the victims of the 1995 genocide in and around Srebrenica. In the context of this paper, the center’s work is seen as an ‘act of teaching’ because within the main exhibition complex and among its many artifacts and contents, one can hear testimonies about crimes committed in and around the city of Srebrenica, see material evidence, and access international legal documents. The goal of each component of this Memorial Center is to remember events of the genocide and its victims, as an act of ethical learning about the importance of understanding the past and a deeper understanding of human responsibility. Integral to this, is that learning about the past is linked to the imperative of building a more meaningful future, and social relations based on reconciliation. The contents of the Center communicate the general imperative “never again”, in which the elements of ethics and pedagogy overlap. Furthermore, it is a question of using an extremely important educational model, personification of history, in terms of presenting personal narratives and objects in order to give a concrete face to cultural history and at the same time, to participate directly in creating closeness and connection with history. By presenting the past in a way wherein we experience a connection to specific human beings who have been brutally killed, each visitor sees, touches, and is touched by stories. The method of creating relationships with others, in this case with victims, while gaining knowledge about the facts of genocide in and around Srebrenica and learning about the importance of responsibility, is fundamental when it comes to ethical education or ethical learning, in all relevant theories of memorial museum practice that is in accordance with Levinas’ theory<sup>3</sup> on the principles of ethics and responsibility. According to Levinas, peace cannot be equated with the end of struggles and wars. In other words, peace must be ‘my’ peace and must start from the self and go to the Other, in desire and goodness, where the self is maintained and lives without egoism, filled with compassion for the suffering of the Other (Levinas, 1976:19).

Furthermore, the way of presentation (in this context, the interior of the exhibition space and the aesthetics of the photographs) represents the heart of the ‘act of learning’. In aesthetic terms, the past is categorized in a spectrum from light to dark and vice versa. Darkness, dehumanization of the human being, suffering, pain, and death are communicated, precisely with an emphasis on light color, the

2 The Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center was opened in September 2003.

3 While, for example, Kant’s ethics were based on the principle of duty, Levinas’ ethics rests on the principle of responsibility for the Other. Levinas’ principle of responsibility for the Other takes its concrete form, in his notions of closeness and justice.

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theme of the feeling of the need for calm, but also hope for a better and more meaningful future. The black-and-white photographs on display at the Center<sup>4</sup> represent a play of light and shadow. Particular attention is paid to shadows, textures, illuminated parts of the scene, volume, composition, plan, angle, and contrast. The basic properties of light play a big role in the specific impression of the interior: contrast and brightness. In the photographs, it is the contrast that gives strength and stirs emotions. This creates the possibility of helping visitors identify with the victims of genocide, their suffering and tribulation, and at the same time, on an emotional and cognitive level, opens the space for arousing a sense of moral responsibility by placing human beings at the epicenter. In essence, such artistic artifacts must correspond to both historical and aesthetic criteria. Aesthetic criteria are specific here because they are positioned outside the pleasure of the beautiful, but are rather, motivated by the search for the expression of the inexpressible (Martinović, 2007). In this way, the Center also represents an aesthetic contact zone between the past, present, and future. The aforementioned contact zone in the museological theoretical approach implies a connection between the social inclusion of the museum and learning (Tinning, 2017:29), with an emphasis on the visitors own revitalization in their role and responsibility towards society, especially the younger generations.

The concept of 'Difficult Matters' in the context of the Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center, the way in which the genocide in and around Srebrenica is presented, is the backbone of reflection and museum practice in B&H. It is a clear answer to the question of what it means when an institution is in the true sense, of service to the public, for its own good and for its benefit, in helping build a value system of elementary civilized values. Various projects, exhibitions, film screenings, especially open public discussions on the genocide in Srebrenica, and having in mind the well-known fact that memorial centers are essentially educational institutions, a great and extremely serious effort is made, but also a challenge to this Center to strengthen its capacities and influence on Bosnian society, the social relations within it, and beyond.

## Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper, written from context of the culture of remembrance and thus the sociology of culture, is to place the notion of *lieux de memoire* in its usual everyday meaning and confront the question of how places of memory can contribute to the social and cultural mastery of reality or where the necessary patterns of meaning are created and spread.

<sup>4</sup> The artist responsible for these photos is the famous Bosnian photographer, Tarik Samarah.

The question of what role the culture of remembrance is to play in society is by no means only of an academic nature however. On the contrary, this question has one essential practical significance. Almost every society, including B&H, must reckon with difficulties that can only be resolved by a culture of remembrance, especially when it comes to the genocide in and around Srebrenica. Without a culture of remembrance, society is as impracticable as it would be without a valid social institutional structure. The problem with mnemonic culture in B&H, especially in the context of the culture of remembrance and genocide in and around Srebrenica, lies in the fact that Bosnian society has been reduced to the idea that value, ethical, and moral issues are placed in the private level of individuals only, i.e. that these issues are to be excluded not only from any social and political process and outside of social management and decision-making, but also cultural policy in B&H.

Based on a brief analysis of the artifacts and contents found in the Srebrenica - Potočari Memorial Center, I realized that it is a *lieu de memoir* or a place of remembrance that interprets the specificity of human cruelty, which does not shy away from the most heinous atrocities to achieve its own goals. This Center has the purpose of paying tribute to all known and unknown victims of genocide in and around Srebrenica, and to, in Popper's words, warn of the constant danger and pernicious consequences of ideologies whose exponents and 'leaders' were convinced of. They were the ones who persuaded others that they knew what was good for 'their' people and humanity since they were so convinced of their own 'possession' of the truth and were ready to kill for its sake (Popper, 1993). It follows that memory is in fact the duty of every individual and every society, with the elementary goal of not repeating the past, which corresponds to Nora's thinking that memory would disappear completely when individual consciousness did not take care of it itself (Nora, 2007:32). Paraphrasing the old words of Gunther Anders, it is not enough to change the world, because changes happen anyway. Usually without our knowledge and participation. However, we must interpret these changes in order to change them further, so that the world would no longer change without us, and eventually turn into a world without us.

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