

# Sabina Kadić-Mackenzie



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

*Learning from genocide -  
for a better future*

Sabina had a happy childhood in Bosnia until the Bosnian War forced her family to flee the country. The family went at first to Slovenia, before they were finally resettled in the UK. Now living in Scotland, Sabina is a social justice campaigner focused on the rights of refugees and people with lived experience of homelessness. She is the Vice Chair of [Beyond Srebrenica](#), a charity dedicated to raising awareness of the Bosnian genocide and promoting tolerance in Scotland.



*'Childhood is the first casualty of war. It starts with the erosion of human connection, and when that is lost, hate has space to grow.'*

Sabina was born in 1984 and grew up in Sanski Most, a town in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina on the banks of the River Sana. She describes her childhood as idyllic, with afterschool swims in the river with friends, fishing with her dad and weekends away with extended family in the countryside.

Sabina's father ran his own business, and her mother worked for a local mining company. Sabina attended the local school with her twin sister, Almina, and their older sister Azra.

She remembers being surrounded by Serb, Croat and Muslim friends and neighbours. Some of her earliest memories are of painting Easter eggs with her Serb friends, and of big Eid celebrations with all the neighbourhood kids. Sabina remembered that 'no one cared which God – or none - you believed in, or where you went to pray.'

From her perspective as an 8-year-old, Sabina started to see things changing in her hometown, notably when the invitations to her friend's birthday parties stopped arriving. Over time, she knew instinctively not to speak to certain neighbours and stopped playing with certain friends. She recalled older Serbian men, who had known her all her life, spitting at her in the stairwell as she politely greeted them but even that felt normal to her as time went on. The weekend trips to the countryside, and contact with family, became less frequent as travelling was becoming dangerous. Not long after, Bosnian Muslims would be ordered to wear white arm bands in public when leaving their homes.

Sabina remembers her parents and neighbours in the living room, crowded around their television, crying or standing in silent disbelief as scenes of soldiers with guns flashed across the screens. The children would be shooed away when the adults noticed them peeking in.

As time went on, the scenes of soldiers from the television began to appear in everyday life. One day, Sabina and her friends found chalk at the empty school building, drew a hopscotch and played outside in the fresh air, even amongst the backdrop of a war. The game stopped as a group of soldiers in full uniform approached, smiling at the children. Instinctively, Sabina stepped back as they drew closer, and she watched as they gave out sweets to the Serbian children who copied the salutes and hate chants of the soldiers.

The night before Sabina and her family left Bosnia, her parents sat her and her sisters down and told them that they would be leaving the next day. They tried to prepare them for what was about to happen – they thought they would be away from home for a matter of months, holding on to hope that the war would end quickly with intervention from the international community.

They swore the sisters to secrecy and told them they could not tell a soul about their plans. Sabina remembers not being able to sleep a wink as she had confessed to her best friend that they would be leaving while playing together for the last time. She sensed the danger of breaking her promise, and telling someone their plans, even someone she trusted.

In the early hours of the next morning, Sabina, her sisters and mother left for Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her father was forced to stay behind, like many of her extended family. Sabina remembers her aunts, uncles and cousins waiting outside in tears to wave goodbye to them. Once in Ljubljana, the family were picked up from the bus station by a relative who had taken in other refugees. In the two-bedroom flat, 16 people slept every night on mattresses on the floor – but they were safe.

Six months later, a church group from Yorkshire approached the family offering safe passage to the UK. Sabina's mother made the difficult decision to move even further from home, knowing that her children weren't receiving any healthcare or schooling, and they had no money. They travelled by bus from Slovenia to England, eventually ending up in Harrogate.

Sabina and five other families arrived at a converted courthouse building in Yorkshire which had been transformed into emergency accommodation. She remembered playing in the big courtroom, amongst all the food and clothing that local people had donated. The family lived in The Old Courthouse for the next seven months before moving into a rented property and finally settling in their new home.

Sabina came to Scotland in 2002 to study Journalism at the University of Stirling. During Fresher's Week, she met her husband, and they married in 2011. Today, they live with their two young daughters in Linlithgow, West Lothian. Sabina works as a senior partner within a corporate communications consultancy and is a social justice campaigner focused on the rights of refugees and people with lived experience of homelessness. She is the Vice Chair of Beyond Srebrenica, a charity dedicated to raising awareness of the Bosnian genocide and promoting tolerance in Scotland.

Sabina believes that *'we must continue to educate, to share stories from survivors – ordinary people, who never thought they would live through the worst of humanity. It is 30 years on from the start of the Bosnian war, but the healing is only just starting for many.'*



Sabina (second from left) on the night her family arrived at the courthouse



Sabina (left) and Almina (right) featured in the newspaper

Find out more...

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

Life stories of those who have endured genocide: [hmd.org.uk/lifestories](https://hmd.org.uk/lifestories)

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