HEN I FIRST arrived in The Hague, I could not have imagined that a year later I would be sitting in the courtroom among the legal officers as the historic judgment in the Popović et al. case was handed down. This was the largest trial to date at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Seven former high-ranking Bosnian Serb military and police officials were convicted of a range of crimes including war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide related to the attacks on Srebrenica and Žepa.

I began my internship in Trial Chamber II of the ICTY in June 2009. My responsibility was to assist the judges and legal officers of the Chamber. Initially, my duties included performing research, assisting in drafting legal documents such as decisions on motions, preparing witness summaries, and attending court proceedings.

Time away from work was spent with other interns who have become fast friends. I visited Rotterdam, Delft, Amsterdam, and even Paris. We enjoyed the beach at Scheveningen, visited the Peace Palace and museums, participated in the Dutch nightlife, and often simply spent afternoons talking and laughing over coffee. The beautiful setting of canals and flowers contrasted sharply with the serious nature of my work at the ICTY.

As the trial proceedings concluded, my role on the team shifted. A shortage of legal officers led to my having a remarkable opportunity to participate in the drafting of the judgment. During the next few months, I found myself completely immersed in the horrific events that occurred in Eastern Bosnia in July 1995, and particularly, the acts of one of the accused during these events as I studied exhibits, trial transcripts, and the final briefs of the parties. I soon found myself becoming more and more comfortable in discussing, analyzing, and evaluating evidence, the arguments of the parties, and complex legal issues with the legal officers and judges.

My days were filled with legal research; studying maps, intercepts, and combat reports; and reading the accounts of witnesses, including individuals who managed to survive mass executions. Their testimonies, in particular, were at once horrifying and heartbreaking. It was not unusual to work late into the night and on weekends.

When my internship was scheduled to end in December 2009, I was asked...
to extend my stay at the tribunal to continue my work on the judgment drafting. Subsequently, a short-term contract enabled me to stay on until the completion of the judgment and changed my status from intern to temporary staff member.

One of my most significant experiences was attending the judges’ deliberations on the judgment. These rare glimpses into what occurs behind closed doors after the trial proceedings have ended reveal an aspect of the international criminal justice system that few people have the opportunity to experience and witness firsthand. I had read and studied ICTY cases in law school, and it seemed almost unbelievable that within only two years after graduation, I was now participating in such a case. It was a profound experience to sit at a table with the judges as they debated and discussed issues and on occasion asked for my opinion.

Through my course work at Washington University School of Law and as a research assistant for Professor Leila Sadat, I had gained a strong foundation in international criminal law. But now I was no longer working on hypothetical situations and legal issues—I was actually applying law to real events and people. I was no longer only studying or analyzing jurisprudence, but contributing to it and to the historical record on the Srebrenica genocide.

As someone who is passionate about international justice and human rights, I am grateful to have had this remarkable opportunity. Living in The Hague and working at the ICTY on the Popović et al. case was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I was very fortunate to be in the unique position to see the case to its conclusion and even more fortunate to have been able to work with the extraordinary individuals of the Chambers staff and the judges on the case. Their dedication and hard work to bring this painful chapter in world history to a just close are truly inspiring.