



Sunday, April 18, 1999

Nation/World

Hope for Survival Emerges in Hell Talk of POW swap encourages Bosnian after 2
1/2 years in captivity Hope Emerges From Hell of Serb Prison Camp
BRENT ISRAELSEN and KARL CATES THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Editor's Note: Kemal Mehinovic, a Bosnian Muslim who now lives in Salt Lake City, spent more than two years in a Serb concentration camp seven years ago. Recently, he returned to Bosnia to retrace his incredible 10-week journey in search of his wife and children. Two Salt Lake Tribune reporters accompanied him. This is the first of eight daily chapters chronicling Kemal's journey.

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"Mehinovic, Kemal!"

The guard's voice shatters the chilly stillness of the little brick barn, lighted only by a few candles and, now, the sharp beam of the guard's black metal flashlight.

"I am Mehinovic," says a groggy figure rising reluctantly from his makeshift mat on the dirt floor, a tattered wool blanket sloughing off his shoulder.

"Come with me," snaps the guard.

Glancing at the harshly shadowed faces of his fellow prisoners, who say nothing, Kemal Mehinovic follows, with head bowed and hands clasped behind his back -- the mandated posture for prisoners in a Serb camp.

The guard, dressed in a faded, olive-green uniform, hooks a thumb through the strap of his Kalishnikov assault rifle slung tightly across his back and orders Kemal to get into a truck that waits, engine running, on the other side of the building.

By Kemal's calculations, it is a couple of hours before midnight on Oct. 5, 1994, a Wednesday -- or maybe a Thursday -- he isn't sure. Kemal is good at keeping track of numbers, but the days of the week sometimes elude him. Time has been a strange companion to Kemal in the 2 1/2 years since the Serbs took him from his wife and children and held him captive, moving him from one prison camp to another throughout northeastern Bosnia.

Kemal's crime is that he is Muslim, and, therefore, an ethnic enemy to the nationalistic, predominantly Orthodox Christian Serbs, many of whom are bent on avenging wrongs committed against their people in times past.

Tonight, Kemal thinks he may be killed, or at least beaten again. It is not uncommon for the guards, drunk on potato vodka or plum brandy, to come to the barn, pick out a few prisoners and pummel them for their own amusement. If the guards take a prisoner outside the building, especially late at night, often he does not return.

A stout, spirited man with a weakness for talking back, Kemal is a favorite target. More than once he has been kicked and beaten with fists, nightsticks, flashlights and baseball bats.

"You are going back to Batkovic," says the guard, referring to the Serbs' principal concentration camp in the area. A smaller guard ties Kemal's wrists together behind his back.

Still assuming he is going to be harmed, Kemal is skeptical but in no position to protest. He climbs into the truck, a military transport with Yugoslav Army markings, and it lumbers out of the parking lot, onto the highway, heading north from Janja, a village on the Bosnian border with Serbia.

Six months ago, the Serbs had brought Kemal and a handful of other prisoners here to Janja to work the fields. He has spent most of the fall digging potatoes for Serb troops fighting the 2 1/2-year-old Bosnian government and "cleansing" the countryside of ethnic Muslims and Roman Catholic Croats, who, like Muslims, stand in the way of the Serb dream of a "Greater Serbia."

Kemal loathes laboring to feed the Serb fighting machine, but he prefers it to Batkovic. In Batkovic, he is an animal in a cage. In Janja, he is an animal in a field. Kemal does not like the cage.

In less than a half-hour, the truck passes the exit to Bijeljina, a city in northeastern Bosnia where paramilitary units led by a

Serbian thug known as "Arkan" (who was indicted recently for war crimes) began the ruthless campaign of "ethnic cleansing" on April 1, 1992.

At his home in Bosanski Samac, a few weeks before he was arrested, Kemal read about Bijeljina in *Oslobodjenje*, Bosnia's biggest daily newspaper, based in Sarajevo. A friend, he remembers, works for that paper.

Kemal wonders now if his friend is still alive. He wonders if Sarajevo is still standing.

In another half hour, the army truck pulls into Batkovic and heads straight to the prison. Kemal heaves a sigh of relief. Maybe he won't die tonight.

Burly prison guards, some sporting bushy beards, greet the truck with the Serbian salute of thumb and first two fingers extended. After inspecting the truck, they pull Kemal out and direct him past the guard shack, through a gate in the perimeter fence topped with barbed wire. One of the camp's low-level commanders approaches Kemal and stands menacingly in front of him.

"Tomorrow, we are getting rid of you," the commander says. "You will be taken to Sarajevo and we will trade you for true national heroes." Kemal stands mute, keeping eyes on the commander's boots.

By "heroes," the commander means Serb soldiers captured by Bosnian government forces. One of the reasons Serbs hold civilian prisoners like Kemal is for their value as pawns, to be exchanged for Serb prisoners of war.

To Kemal, a prisoner exchange is the next best thing to an end of the war. It would mean his freedom. It would mean he might survive this ordeal. It would mean seeing his family again.

The guards lead Kemal to the large rectangular barns that have been converted into a prison barracks. They untie his hands and allow him to use the latrine. One of the guards hands him his cigarette, which has one drag left. Kemal savors the smoke as long as possible before they shove him inside the barracks.

In the darkness, he stumbles over other prisoners and recoils at the human stench of the room, which is crammed wall-to-wall with men, many of whom are sick, all of whom have gone too long unbathed.

A friend from Kemal's hometown reaches up and hands him a blanket he had been using for a pillow.

"Hvala," Kemal whispers. Thanks.

"How are you?" asks the friend.

"Fine, I think," Kemal replies. He kneels onto the concrete floor, which sits cold beneath a thin layer of old bug-infested straw, and snuggles between his friend and another prisoner he does not recognize.

"Tomorrow they are taking me to Sarajevo," Kemal says. "Prisoner exchange, you know."

"Good. I will pray for you," says his friend, managing a smile as he lays his head onto the floor, drifting back to sleep.

Despite his own exhaustion, Kemal remains awake, staring into the blackness of the barracks. What will tomorrow bring? Kemal knows better than to put much hope in an enemy commander's word.