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On the Road to Freedom

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Or Is It Just Another of Serb Captors' Lies? Kemal's Journey: Freedom Near Or Is It a Lie?

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Editor's Note: This is the second installment of Kemal Mehinovic's struggle to find his wife and children in war-torn Bosnia, an odyssey he recently retraced in his native land with two Salt Lake Tribune reporters. In the opening chapter, Kemal, a Bosnian Muslim prisoner in a Serb concentration camp, was told he is to be exchanged for Serb POWs, but he suspects treachery.

It does not take much to awaken Kemal Mehinovic this morning.

He has spent a restless night inside a large barn converted into barracks for inmates at a Serb-run concentration camp in Batkovic. Kemal slept poorly because he could not stop thinking of the day ahead.

It is Oct. 6, 1994, and today, his Serb captors say, he will be taken to Sarajevo and set free as one of 12 Muslim and Croat prisoners to be exchanged with the Bosnian government for Serb prisoners.

If the exchange materializes, it will mean an end to 2 1/2 years of imprisonment, mental anguish, physical torture and forced labor. It will mean seeing his wife and two teen-age children again -- wherever they are.

The sun casts a reddish-gold sheen on the mist that hangs over northeastern Bosnia, a mostly flat agricultural plain of the Sava and Drina rivers. Kemal can see the sky through the large open windows along the top of the barracks walls, and he guesses the time is about 9 a.m.

The front door of the barn swings open, and a guard shouts out a name. A thin young man stands and staggers outside, taking baby steps as though he were shackled. He is the first ordered out as the watchman drones down a list of names before calling Kemal's.

Squinting into the morning light, Kemal exits the barracks and submits to the search. The guard fails to find Kemal's only secret: a small wooden carving he has hidden in his waistband. The talisman depicts a sad figure walking with head bowed and hands clasped behind his back, the stance prisoners are forced to take when moving about the prison yard.

Kemal has carved other pieces as well, using a nail and small pieces of firewood. During these lost years in captivity, he crafted templates of a fish, a bird and the names of his wife and children. But the guards found those months ago. They kept the animal carvings for themselves. The ones of his family, they tossed into the woodburning stove. Curiously, they never asked about the nail, which he kept hidden in a crack in the concrete floor. Kemal hopes other prisoners will use it to make their own carvings, or, he muses, to poke a guard in the eye.

After the search, Kemal climbs onto the bus, taking a seat behind Sead Mehic, a childhood friend from their hometown of Bosanski Samac in northern Bosnia near the Croatian border. Kemal winks supportively then turns away. It is hard to look at Sead, to whom these past 29 months have been particularly cruel. Because Sead was an active member of SDA, Bosnia's primarily Muslim political party, the Serbs singled him out for "special" treatment. They pulled three of his teeth with pliers, for souvenirs, and broke at least five ribs during frequent beatings. The abuse, along with malnourishment, has taken a toll on Sead's immune system. He is ill and it shows.

With all 12 prisoners on board, the doors of the bus slam shut. Accompanying them are a Serb army major and two soldiers, each carrying a Kalishnikov rifle, a pistol and a sheathed hunting knife. The soldiers are wearing berets emblazoned with the "Chetnik" logo, the "Four C's" in a cross that represent the Serb nationalist battle cry "Only Gathering Can Save the Serbs."

Though the guards look menacing, they do not harm the prisoners.

At the major's command, the driver puts the bus into gear. Kemal looks out his window upward to a 15-foot-high tower that holds a guard with a machine gun. He mouths an obscenity at the sentry as the bus lurches forward, out of the prison camp and onto the road

heading out of Batkovic.

Kemal hopes he never sees this place again, but figures he will be back. The Serbs have lied in the past about where they were taking him. He has been told before that he would be freed in an exchange for Serb prisoners, only to be transferred to another prison camp somewhere else instead.

Within a half hour, the bus passes Bijeljina, where the Serbs' campaign of "ethnic cleansing" began in April 1992. The trip takes the prisoners through the village of Janja, where Kemal had been forced to labor in the potato fields for the past six months.

To the left is the Drina River, which on most maps forms much of the Bosnia's eastern boundary, separating it from Serbia. To the nationalist Serbs whose goal is to fuse Bosnia into a "Greater Serbia," preferably without Muslims or Croats present, the Drina is no boundary.

Continuing south, the bus lumbers tediously, never exceeding 50 mph. It crosses the river into Serbia and follows the waterway to Zvornik, then back across the river into Bosnia. By now the road winds into the Majevisa Mountains, part of a vast network of ranges that dominate the Bosnian landscape.

As the bus enters the first of a series of mountain tunnels, Kemal's stomach grows queasy, a combination of motion sickness and hunger. He has not eaten since yesterday afternoon, at Janja, where he had the standard fare, bits of dry bread and a small bowl of porkhead soup.

Soon, the town of Vlasenica appears. Here, the Serbs systematically reduced the Muslim population from 60 percent to zero in a matter of months. It holds bad memories for Kemal. A year ago, the Serbs brought him here, holding him in an old high school converted into a prison camp. Along with other able-bodied captives, Kemal often was trucked to the front lines to build bunkers, dig foxholes, and retrieve bodies of Serbs who had fallen in combat. Many prisoners died in the process, mostly from "friendly fire" coming from the Bosnian side.

For a split second, Kemal thinks this is his fate, to be interred again at Vlasenica. But the bus does not stop. It proceeds south, further into the mountains.

By 1 p.m., they are in Han Pijesak where the driver stops to

refuel at a Serb army base.

"Would the Turks like something to eat?" one of the guards asks derisively, referring to the Muslims' ethnic origin in the Turkey-based Ottoman Empire, which less than a century ago controlled much of Serbia and Bosnia.

A few minutes later, another guard brings the 12 prisoners six loaves of bread and a couple of liters of bottled mineral water. To the prisoners, who are accustomed to meager victuals, this is a feast.

Negotiating a mountain road through some of eastern Bosnia's most rugged terrain, the bus eventually arrives in the Bosnian Serb stronghold of Pale, 50 kilometers east of Sarajevo. They are met by a team from the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), which help to arrange and consummate prisoner exchanges.

After some paperwork, Kemal and the other prisoners are loaded into UNPROFOR armored personnel carriers (APCs) and transported down Trebevic Mountain and into Grbavica, the only Serb-controlled quarter of downtown Sarajevo. It is dark now, but by the wash of the APCs' headlamps, Kemal can see the battered, burned shells of houses, cafes, shops and other buildings ravaged by war.

On the Brotherhood and Unity Bridge, over the Miljacka River in downtown Sarajevo, the vehicles come to a stop and open their doors. Kemal steps down gingerly from the vehicle and walks a few steps toward the bridge, confused momentarily by his liberty. The confusion dissipates into joy.

He nods gratefully to the UNPROFOR escorts, kneels to the ground and kisses it.

"I am free," Kemal cries out loud.

He is far from safety, however. And he is farther still from his family.