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A Respite From Madness, Then Thoughts of Family Drive Refugee Onward Refugee Unwinds In Sarajevo, Then Moves On

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Editor's Note -- This is the third installment of Bosnian prisoner Kemal Mehinovic's struggle to reunite with his family, whom he has not seen for 2 1/2 years. In the second chapter, Kemal, a Muslim, was transported from a Serb concentration camp to Sarajevo, where he was exchanged for Bosnian Serb POWs.

Laid out in staggered fashion on the Brotherhood and Unity Bridge in Sarajevo, four railway shipping containers create an obstacle course for Kemal Mehinovic as he realizes he still stands in harm's way.

One of the big crates is emblazoned with the spray-painted words, "Pazi Snajper!" Watch out for snipers!

Kemal is an easy target here in the middle of "Sniper Alley," a corridor of streets and walkways exposed to rifle fire from buildings and hills in Grbavica, the Serb-controlled section of central Sarajevo. Though night has fallen and a cease-fire supposedly is in effect in Sarajevo, Kemal feels vulnerable. He walks swiftly to the shipping containers then darts across the bridge to the Bosnian government side of the Miljacka River.

A Bosnian policeman directs him to the army office that documents and debriefs newly freed prisoners. It is Oct. 6, 1994, and Kemal has just been released from 2 1/2 years of imprisonment in Serb concentration camps.

Before the debriefing, Kemal calls a friend, Esad Goro, who he believes still lives in Sarajevo.

By luck, the phone system is working today. His friend's wife, Fatima, answers.

"This is Kemal Mehinovic," he says, matter-of-factly, as though he were making a social call.

"Kemal!" cries Fatima, incredulous at first.

They chat briefly, then he asks to speak to Esad. The line goes silent for a long moment.

Esad is not here, she tells him. He is dead, killed in a gunbattle a year ago in Sarajevo.

Kemal offers condolences, and expresses anger at this awful war.

Fatima offers to put Kemal up at her place and comes to the army office in her car to pick him up.

They embrace and kiss one another on each side of the face, then they go to her flat in Alipasino Polje, a new neighborhood on the west end of town.

To get there, she drives down Proleterske Brigade, the main east-west thoroughfare, part of which is in "Sniper Alley." The once bustling city now is dead. Only a handful of people can be seen on the sidewalks, and the only cars are occasional United Nations vehicles.

Kemal lights up a Marlboro that Fatima gives him, from a pack she bartered for in the town's black market. It is the first decent cigarette he has had in a long time. Rolling down the window to let out the smoke, he hears gunfire in the distance, but Fatima is unruffled by it. Sarajevans by now have long adjusted to life in a war zone.

Within a few minutes, they are at Fatima's apartment building, a lime-green, 10-story structure that, like all other buildings in the vicinity, wears a thousand scars of battle. It has taken direct hits from tanks and artillery shells that have left 2-foot-wide holes in the roof and walls, which also are pocked by shrapnel. Not a single pane of glass remains in the windows, now covered instead with plastic bearing the initials UNHCR, the acronym for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

There is no outside lighting, and the entryway is dark and uninviting. Kemal tries the elevator but it is not working. They take the stairs.

That night, they stay up late, talking about their families and about Esad. Kemal learns Esad died on the very bridge where he was just set free.

Kemal spends nearly a week in Sarajevo, trying to rest, eat, catch up with other friends he finds in town. Gradually, he begins to regain some of the sanity that has slipped away from him during the recent madness he has endured.

His thoughts, however, are mainly on his family. There is no way to communicate with them, so he decides to set off on his own to find them and get them out of Bosnia, away from the killing.

His immediate goal is to reach Gradacac, a town 100 miles north of Sarajevo, on the Bosnian government side of the battle lines. His mother and sister fled there shortly after the war started in April 1992.

A mere 15 miles beyond Gradacac is a village called Bazik, where Kemal's wife and children took refuge 1 1/2 years ago. It might as well be a world away, though, because between Gradacac and Bazik is the Posavina Corridor, a fiercely contested strip of soil that links land conquered by Bosnian Serbs' in western Bosnia to their conquests in the east. Kemal hopes he can find some surreptitious passage across the no-man's land. That problem is days away, though. Kemal first must find a way out of Sarajevo, which is under siege by the Serbs.

Late in the afternoon of Oct. 12, 1994, Kemal bids goodbye to Fatima and other friends, and strikes out on foot toward the tangle of Dobrinja, a newer Sarajevo neighborhood that sprang up as part of the construction boom in anticipation of the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. The Olympics are long forgotten in Dobrinja, now a ghost town of bombed-out flats and abandoned vehicles disabled by gunfire.

Cursing the Serbs, Kemal darts from building to building, his instincts on edge, warning him that he could be in enemy rifle sights. On his right, a few streets away, is Nedjarici, a Serb-controlled suburb. To the front of him and off to the left is another battle line.

Kemal crouches by a building to catch his breath and consults a crinkled map that a Bosnian army official drew to guide him to "the tunnel," the fabled escape route from Sarajevo.

Constructed secretly by the Bosnian army in the opening months of the war two years ago, the tunnel is Sarajevo's only link to the outside world. The airport -- officially controlled by the United Nations but in reality by the Serbs, who have it nearly surrounded -- is restricted to diplomats, journalists and U.N. personnel.

The tunnel runs beneath the airport to Bosnian government-held territory on the other side, which is connected by way of Mount Igman to government holdings in the country's interior.

With the help of a Bosnian policeman on patrol in Dobrinja, Kemal finds the ramshackle building that serves as the entrance to the tunnel. He is greeted by a surprisingly cheery Bosnian army sergeant.

"Good evening," says the sergeant.

Kemal returns the greeting and pulls from his pocket a permit for passage.

"Watch your head," the sergeant says, taking the permit.

"Thanks," Kemal says. "You don't know how glad I am to see this place."

The sergeant laughs and wishes him luck.

Bending to hands and knees, Kemal squeezes into the opening and begins crawling. The tunnel is about 4 feet in diameter and some 800 yards long. It is girded with iron support bars, which Kemal bumps his head on more than once. Along the ceiling, a string of lights illuminates the way, and on the bottom a row of hoses sucks out groundwater seepage.

His breathing labored after a short distance, Kemal remembers stories of people suffocating in the tunnel.

He wishes he had not remembered that right now.