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Nation/World

One Last Look Back as Kemal Escapes Sarajevo Sarajevo Left Behind in Search for
Family

BRENT ISRAELSEN and KARL CATES THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Editor's Note -- This is the fourth installment of Kemal Mehinovic's trek to find his family after 2 1/2 years in a Serb prison. In the third chapter, Kemal, a Bosnian Muslim, began his escape from the besieged city of Sarajevo by crawling into a dangerous tunnel beneath the airport.

Within 15 minutes, Kemal emerges from the tunnel, gasping for fresh air.

A tongue-in-cheek sign outside greets him: "Paris: 3,765 km."

Paris will have to wait, he muses, as he scurries up a trench that runs parallel to Sarajevo International Airport's main runway.

He climbs to ground level and walks quickly southward, protected on each side by rows of overturned vehicles, freight containers and concrete blocks intended to stop sniper fire from Serb positions on both sides of this narrow strip of land.

Here, on the outskirts of Sarajevo, the Bosnian government maintains only a tenuous hold, controlling a small access that links the city with other parts of government-controlled land in Bosnia's interior.

It is Oct. 12, 1994, six days since Kemal was released in Sarajevo by his Serbian captors, who had held him prisoner in concentration and labor camps in northeastern Bosnia for 2 1/2 years.

Tonight, the 38-year-old Kemal is bound for Gradacac, a town about 90 miles north of Sarajevo, to find his mother and his twin sister. His ultimate goal, however, is to be reunited with his wife and

children, whom he believes are in the village of Bazik just 15 miles north of Gradacac but across a battleground held by the Serbs.

First, he must get over Mount Igman, which rises 2,000 feet above Sarajevo.

Kemal quickens his pace. Though night is falling, he fears he may be picked off at any time by Serb snipers.

In 10 minutes, he is at the base of Igman, heavily defended by the Bosnian army but with Serb gunners in the hills a mile or two to the left.

Feeling the evening's chill, Kemal puts on the jacket he has been carrying since he left Sarajevo earlier in the day. The jacket, his pants, a shirt, sweater, a sturdy pair of shoes he got from the Red Cross, a plastic sack holding food and water and a small wood carving he made in captivity are his only possessions. He stops to munch a piece of bread and take a sip of water before continuing up and over Mount Igman. He craves a good beer. A Karlovacsko, his favorite Croatian import, would do nicely.

Weakened by his time in prison, he labors to walk up the switchback road on Igman. Despite the darkness, he is nervous. Every strange sound or movement sends him ducking behind a tree or falling to the ground.

By 10 p.m., Kemal, exhausted and wet with sweat, tops Mount Igman, pausing to rest. He turns back toward Sarajevo and pities the scene.

War came there abruptly in April 1992, barely a month after the Bosnian people had voted to secede from Yugoslavia. Kemal remembers that time well.

On April 6, a day before the international community officially recognized Bosnia as an independent republic, pro-Bosnia demonstrators rallied at the Parliament building in downtown Sarajevo. They marched in support of a multi-ethnic nation where Muslims, Croats and Serbs could live together in harmony, and to condemn the growing nationalism that was dividing Bosnia.

Bosnian Serb nationalists, whose dream was to roll Bosnia into a "Greater Serbia," were staunchly against Bosnian independence. Serbian Democratic Party snipers, from positions in the Holiday Inn across from the Parliament building, opened fire on the rally, killing 11 people. Later that day, the new Bosnian government's

police and rag-tag army forces clashed with Bosnian Serb units, and the first mortar shells fell on the city.

Barricades were erected throughout the city, demarcating battle lines between the new government and the rebel Serbs, who, with the backing of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, already had the city surrounded with tanks and big guns.

For the next four years, Sarajevo was under siege, cut off from the free world, strangled of provisions. As Western Europe and the United States remained neutral observers, the Serbs, from their perches in the mountains surrounding Sarajevo, rained down more than 1 million artillery and missile rounds upon the city. Nearly 11,000 people died, thousands more were injured, and thousands of buildings were destroyed or heavily damaged.

While some Serb forces held a brutal grip on Sarajevo, others went on a bloody rampage through eastern, northern and northwestern Bosnia in a carefully planned campaign of "ethnic cleansing," underwritten in large part by Milosevic. Serb paramilitary and special police units roamed the countryside, killing, raping and expelling Muslims and Croats. Part of the campaign involved taking thousands of non-Serb men prisoner for use as slave labor and for prisoner exchanges.

Kemal and his family, who are Muslim, fell victim to the ethnic cleansing. Kemal was arrested and imprisoned.

Flipping his collar against the cold now, Kemal turns away from Sarajevo. He tells himself his only chance of survival is to focus on his family and on rescuing them from the nightmare that Bosnia has become.

Soon, he stumbles across a road and flags down a truck belonging to Caritas, a charity that helps civilians victimized by the war.

It is driven by a Croatian man, whose accent Kemal recognizes immediately.

"Good evening," says Kemal, smiling broadly. "You wouldn't happen to have a bottle of Karlovacsko, would you?"

The driver laughs.

"No, but I do have a cigarette," he says, offering Kemal a light.

The stranger takes him aboard and they drive to the nearby village of Pazaric, where the police let them spend the night in the station. The Caritas driver says he will take Kemal toward Gradacac the next day, but warns him of the danger.

"The fighting has been picking up. It's as though both sides want to get in a few good shots before winter," he says, laughing.

Kemal smiles and says he will take his chances.