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Nation/World

Battlefield, 15 Miles Separate Kemal From Family Kemal Seeks Way to Bridge Serb

Battlefield

BRENT ISRAELSEN and KARL CATES THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Editor's Note -- This is the sixth installment of the story of a Bosnian Muslim in search of his wife and children after he was released from 2 1/2 years of Serb captivity. In the previous chapter, Kemal Mehinovic hitchhiked to a town where his mother was supposedly living, and, quite by accident, found her apartment building.

Refika Mehinovic weeps when she sees her son, Kemal, for the first time in more than two years.

"Kemo! Kemo! Kemo!" she cries, his nickname the only words she can muster at first as she rushes to the scraggly-bearded figure in her doorway.

She had heard from the Red Cross that Kemal had been released by the Serbs as part of a prisoner exchange in Sarajevo, but she had not heard from him and did not expect to see him this soon.

"How are you, mother? Is everything fine?" Kemal asks.

"Yes, yes. We are all fine," she says, refusing to let him out of her embrace. "How are you? You don't look well. Did the Serbs treat you badly?"

"I am fine, mother. No one can hurt me. Not even the Serbs and their bullets," Kemal says, grinning as he pushes out his chest like Superman.

The truth is, Kemal is hurting, and he cannot hide his pain or pallor from his mother. His nose and left cheekbone, broken in recent beatings, still are tender, as are three of his ribs, which

have been cracked and reinjured often. He is exhausted and malnourished, reduced from a once beefy 225 pounds before the war to 140 pounds today. His eyes droop tiredly on a thin face that makes him look older than his 38 years.

It is mid-October 1994, two weeks since Kemal was freed from Serb concentration camps. Since then, he has been obsessed with finding his family, starting first with his mother, who, along with Kemal's twin sister, have been living as refugees in Gradacac since the Bosnian war broke out in the spring of 1992.

After Kemal takes a sponge bath, his mother, 69 years old and worn thin from life under siege, sits him down to a wartime "feast" of canned beef and fish, rice and homemade bread. She tells him that his wife and children remain refugees in Bazik, a town in the hands of the Bosnian-Croatian alliance just 15 miles to the north but across the Serb-controlled Posavina Corridor that she says is impossible to cross.

Kemal, ever hopeful, believes he will find a way across the battlefield.

First, he must talk to his family, to let them know that he is OK.

Phone lines through the Serb corridor, however, were destroyed long ago. The only communication across that territory is by cellular phones, and the only people who have those are Bosnian military officials. Because the military is leery of spies, it takes Kemal about a week to persuade a commander to let him use his cell phone. Kemal calls a friend in Bazik and arranges to call again when his family will be there.

"Hello?" Kemal shouts over the static of the line when someone answers on the other end.

"Hi, Dad," says a soft but deep voice.

"Damir?" Kemal says. He does not recognize the voice at first and chokes back tears as he teases his 16-year-old son about finally making it to puberty.

Damir is thrilled to be speaking to his father, but he suppresses his emotions because he is surrounded by his friends, teen-agers who, like him, have been conscripted into the military.

Kemal asks to speak to his wife but Damir says she is in Zagreb,

the Croatian capital, to arrange for a visa so Kemal can travel through that country to get back to his family. Like Kemal's mother, his wife, Fazila, heard about Kemal's release through the Red Cross, which distributes prisoner-release lists in the region. Damir gives his father a number in Zagreb where he can reach Fazila.

Father and son chat a few short minutes longer, with Kemal assuring Damir that he will see him soon. Damir advises his dad not to try to cross the Serb corridor because it is heavily guarded by troops and minefields. Many have died trying, Damir warns.

Kemal talks the commander into letting him make one more quick call, to Fazila in Zagreb.

She sounds great, Kemal thinks to himself, his own voice quivering as he tries to calm her crying.

Fazila eventually tells Kemal she has arranged for a visa to be sent to a friend's house in Sarajevo. He can pick it up there and then try to find safe passage through Croatia.

But Kemal is too close to his goal to be mired in red tape now. He does not want to go to Sarajevo because it remains besieged by the Serbs, and there is a new offensive by the Bosnian government army to break out. It is a dangerous place to get into and out of, and he does not want to push his luck there, he tells her.

"You would be pushing your luck not to have a visa," Fazila insists.

Kemal tells her not to worry, and their conversation comes to an end as the nervous commander tells Kemal to say goodbye.

Time slows now, and for another month, Kemal is stuck in Gradacac, which is under constant attack from Serb artillery. There is no way out of town, because civilian vehicles are not allowed in or out. Confined largely to one building for hours on end, deprived of the cigarettes and coffee he craves, Kemal feels again like a prisoner. Though there are no beatings, he is in near agony from worrying about his wife and children and wondering whether he would ever escape this war with his family intact.

Kemal makes up his mind to leave Gradacac, but he decides against trying to cross the deadly Serb corridor to the north.

Instead, he will head south again toward Sarajevo, then circle

back to Bazik through Croatia. Kemal figures the trip will cover nearly 800 miles -- 800 miles to a place that if not for the war would be a 15-minute drive.

The trip will be risky not only because of the war but because of wartime paranoia. Kemal's lack of proper documents could land him in jail or cause him to be turned back.

Before he leaves, Kemal spends many hours trying to calm his mother, who is nearly hysterical about his boldness. She argues he should stay put in Gradacac, which is well-defended, until the war ends. He counters that there is no end in sight to this war.

Finally, in mid-December, there is a temporary cease-fire.

Enver, the same relief-agency driver who gave Kemal a lift into town weeks earlier, offers him a ride back out.