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Nation/World

Halfway There: Kemal Makes It to Adriatic Coast
Kemal Makes It Halfway Through
to His Family

BRENT ISRAELSEN and KARL CATES THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Editor's Note -- This is the seventh installment of the story of Kemal Mehinovic's search through war-ravaged Bosnia for his wife and two children. In the previous chapter, Mehinovic reached his mother's home in Gradacac and made cell-phone contact with his family, who are just 15 miles away. The only way to reach them safely, however, is a circuitous 800-mile route through Croatia. Even that trip is fraught with danger.

On a wintry morning in Gradacac, northern Bosnia, Kemal Mehinovic packs a small duffel bag with a change of clothing, identification papers, a liter of water, a small can of beef, some bread and an apple.

He carefully wraps two bottles of perfume -- one for his wife, Fazila, and one for his teen-age daughter, Elvira.

The gifts come from some of the 200 German marks that his older brother, Mujarem, managed to send him from Austria. Mujarem, who escaped Bosnia with his family in the early days of the war, also sent the duffel bag through his connections in Sarajevo. Such are the protocols of wartime commerce, and Kemal considers it a small miracle that the money and bag arrived at all, let alone in time for him to make his journey.

Despite his still weakened condition from time spent in prison, Kemal is all smiles today as he leaves the relative safety of his mother's apartment to set out for his destination: his wife, daughter and son in the town of Bazik, 15 miles to the north, as the bird flies.

Unfortunately, Kemal is not a bird. That 15 miles is through a

corridor of heavy fighting and territory controlled by the enemy Serbs, so he must take the long way around, about 800 miles, through central and western Bosnia, then around the horn of Croatia.

Kemal's mother makes one last plea for him to stay in Gradacac but it is in vain. He reassures her that if he has made it this far since his release from Serb concentration camps six weeks ago, he will make it to Bazik.

His goal today is to get as far as Mostar, about 165 miles away through Bosnia's rugged, mountainous interior. He already has a ride that far, with a relief-agency driver named Enver. Kemal throws his bag into Enver's small truck and they are off, heading southeast toward Tuzla, then southward toward Sarajevo. They will avoid Sarajevo, however, still under siege by the Serbs.

Wet weather slows them down, and they are forced to spend a cold night in the truck in a small town called Jablanica, about 35 miles shy of Mostar.

The next morning, they drive past the spectacular Neretva Cliffs in the Cvrsnica Mountains. Though still in Bosnia, this is territory conquered by ethnic Croats, who only recently fought against the new, mostly Muslim Bosnian government. Though the Croats and Muslims just have signed a treaty, their alliance is tenuous. Kemal grows increasingly anxious with each new roadblock, fearing he could be arrested by the Croats this time and put in a camp.

Such is the dilemma of this contorted Bosnian war among the Serbs, the Croats and the Muslims.

"It is hard to know friend from foe," Kemal says.

"Relax," says Enver, a Croatian, reassuring Kemal that the Croats and Muslims are allies against the Serbs.

Still, Kemal asks not to be taken into Mostar but to be let out quietly on a road heading out of the city, toward Croatia.

To calm his nerves, Kemal whistles and hums old Bosnian folk songs, ones he and his friends used to sing around the campfire in happier times.

One that sticks mercilessly in his head is about two young lovers forbidden to marry because their parents are enemies. One day the girl falls seriously ill and craves a quince fruit but there are none

to be found in the village so the young man goes off on a long journey to find her the fruit. By the time he returns she is being lowered into her grave.

Kemal hopes for a better ending to his story.

"Sretno!" Good luck, Enver shouts, after stopping the truck on an empty stretch of highway outside of Mostar.

"I will never forget your help," Kemal says, shaking his new friend's hand.

"If you are ever in Zagreb after the war, look me up," Enver says. He puts the truck into gear and makes a U-turn back toward Mostar. Kemal waves an arm high then slings the duffel bag over his shoulder.

He saunters to the road and begins hitchhiking. Within a half hour, he gets a ride, from another Croatian, who takes him as far as Medjugorje, near the Croatian border. From there, Kemal hikes into the wooded hills and skirts the border crossing, where armed guards with police dogs stop traffic to check for visas and passports. Not only does Kemal have an aversion to armed guards and police dogs, he lacks the proper documents for passage through Croatia.

A safe distance from the border, Kemal makes his way back to the highway and resumes hitchhiking. Five rides later, an hour or two before midnight, he is in the Croatian city of Split, halfway through this final leg of a journey his once comfortable life could have never anticipated.

Kemal gulps a few deep breaths of the mild breeze wafting in from the Adriatic Sea, then he takes a taxi to the home of a friend he knows here named Vlado Ugrin.

Their reunion is warm and poignant.

"My, you are looking great for a man your age," Kemal says to Ugrin.

"I wish I could say the same for you," Ugrin replies, laughing.

The last time the two men saw each other they were prisoners in a Serb concentration camp at Batkovic.