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Kemal Pushes On, Driven by One Goal: Family Reunion

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Editor's Note: This is the final chapter of the story of Kemal Mehinovic and his quest to reunite with his family after spending 2 1/2 years in Serb captivity. In the previous chapter, Kemal, lacking documents and fearing arrest, began a circuitous 800-mile trip through Croatia.

Vlado Ugrin presses his former concentration-camp companion to stay another day or two in Split, Croatia, to rest and to get better acquainted.

He might as well be talking to the town's ancient wall.

Kemal Mehinovic has but one thought in mind: the final portion of a long journey he hopes will reunite him with his wife and children, still 400 miles away on the northern Bosnian border.

A Bosnian national, Kemal also is anxious to get out of Croatia because he fears being caught without a passport or visa. It would kill him, he tells his friend, to be thrown in jail or deported back to Sarajevo after he has made it this far. He will leave tomorrow.

On a sunny but crisp morning in December 1994, Vlado takes Kemal to the station and sees him off on a bus bound for Zagreb, 10 hours away. He gives him a pack of York brand cigarettes and 75 German marks for the fare, and wishes him "Sretan put." Happy trails.

The bus is standing room only, packed primarily with people like himself, a sampling of the nearly 1 million refugees uprooted by the ongoing 2 1/2-year war in Bosnia. Except for the children on board, it is a subdued crowd. Kemal looks at the faces of his fellow travelers and surmises each has a story to tell of pain, privation, suffering and sorrow in a conflict that has killed nearly 200,000 people.

They keep to themselves, however, and try to sleep as the bus bounces its way north via a treacherous, two-lane road along the Dalmatian Coast.

Kemal made sure to get a window seat on the left side of the bus so he can watch the medieval castles, the Adriatic Sea and its myriad islands roll by. The spectacular scenery is therapeutic, and he sinks into an unfamiliar peace, relaxing mind and body for the first

time since his release from captivity two months ago.

At the port town of Rijeka, Kemal's repose comes to an end as his bus changes course, away from the sea, bound for Croatia's interior. The bus stops once, in Karlovac, home of the brewery that makes his favorite beer, home also to Croatia's largest refugee camp, which houses thousands of displaced Croatians and Bosnians. It is the destination today for many of the passengers.

Soon, the bus is on its final leg to Zagreb, where his fears of being stopped by the frontier police are renewed.

"Please don't ask for papers," he mutters to himself.

To his relief, the police do not demand travel documents from anyone. As Kemal scurries to change buses, he notices they make only a cursory visual inspection of the vehicles and luggage for weapons and other contraband.

Shortly after 8 p.m., Kemal leaves Zagreb, eastbound, on the country's only freeway. He is in familiar territory now. Next stop is the bus station in Dakovo.

Within two hours, Kemal sees a sign announcing an upcoming intersection. He moves to the edge of his seat to get a better look. Dakovo, left, Bosanski Samac, right.

Bosanski Samac, known simply as "Samac," is Kemal's hometown. It is where Kemal's infernal journey began nearly three years ago.

He remembers the details well.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, May 27, 1992, about five weeks after Serb paramilitary units had seized control of Samac, Kemal was taking a nap in his home, located above the bakery he owned and operated in the center of town. Two Serb police officers came to his door and demanded that he come to the police station for questioning. Knowing the Serbs had no reason to detain him, he resisted and they beat him with batons, in front of his family.

The policemen took him away and asked him for a statement, but he had none to give. He had done nothing wrong. His only "crime," he believed, was being born a Slavic Muslim in a land the Serbs saw as belonging to them.

For the next five months, Kemal was kept at the Samac police station or in a Serb military warehouse across the street, locked in cramped rooms with up to 300 other non-Serb prisoners. Living in squalid quarters and fed inadequate, often filthy food, the men were subjected to frequent beatings and torture. Kemal witnessed the executions of three Croats and heard through a wall the cries of another man being beaten to death with a club.

Some guards pulled the teeth of the prisoners for souvenirs, and some forced prisoners to perform oral sex on each other.

Among Kemal's tormentors was a young Serb named Blagoje Simic, who later would be one of six people indicted by an international court for war crimes committed at Samac. Before the Serbs' takeover of the town, Simic was Kemal's family physician.

After Kemal's arrest, his wife and children lived in virtual servitude to the Serbs in Samac and eventually were expelled, losing all their possessions except that which they could carry with them as they were herded onto a bus leaving town. They sought refuge with friends in the nearby town of Bazik, which was under control of the Croatian military, an ally with the Bosnian government against the rebel Serbs, and just a few hundred yards from the battlefield. Samac's non-Serb population soon plunged from 17,000 people to fewer than 600.

In October 1992, Kemal and about 40 other prisoners from Samac were blindfolded and transported to Batkovic, a concentration camp in northeastern Bosnia, where the nightmare continued until his release two years later.

As the bus turns left today to Dakovo, Kemal looks with longing down the road toward Samac, which for now lies beyond his reach. His hometown holds for him a lifetime of good memories that cannot be erased, even by those few months of terror. He wants, someday, to return.

From Dakovo, Kemal boards one last bus, which drops him off a half hour later at Zupanje, across the Sava River and slightly east of Bazik. A ferry takes him across the river. He finds a road heading west and starts walking.

This is how he began his journey, on foot and alone, making his way to freedom in Sarajevo a couple of months ago.

A man driving by stops and gives him a ride to a nearby military base where he encounters an old acquaintance named Cibric, who knows precisely the house where Kemal's family is staying.

An hour or so before midnight, Cibric pulls up to the house, leaves Kemal in the car, and knocks on the front door. Inside, Kemal's wife and children are playing cards with a few friends. Kemal's 13-year-old daughter, Elvira, answers the door.

Cibric steps in out of the cold. He dallies over the usual niceties then turns to Elvira and announces nonchalantly, "Your dad is outside."

"You are joking," says Kemal's wife, Fazila, knowing well this man's penchant for pranksterism.

"Would I joke about something like that?" he retorts.

Fazila, Elvira and Kemal's son, Damir, rush outside, where they come face to face with the wide and unmistakable grin of their husband and father.

"Babo!" screams Elvira. Daddy!

As joyful sobbing displaces all words during the next 20 minutes, news of Kemal's return travels quickly through Bazik, home to several refugee families from Bosanski Samac.

Soon there are nearly two dozen people at Kemal's homecoming celebration.

The party lasts all night.