***‘*The Killing Days’** by Kemal Pervanic

i'll never return to my hometown

there is nobody waiting for me

and all the faces faded away a long time ago

and it has been a long time since i have known their  names

but sometimes in the winter

while the winds are crying  over the days

i remember you

you my past love

and some past tenderness

and something whispers in my heart and i know

that in this world i am all alone

The bloodiest European conflict since World War II began in 1992,when the Yugoslav republic of Serbia-led by fiercely nationalist president Slobodan Milosevic and abetted by nationalist Bosnian Serbs-began a brutal campaign to annex parts of republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina(called Bosnia for short).Ethnically divided Yugoslavia had already come apart at the seams: The republics of Slovenia and Croatia had established their independence(Croatia after a devastating war with Serbia); the republic of Macedonia had announced its secession. In April, after Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence was formally recognized by the international community, the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army and Bosnian Serb militias moved to grab as much of the republic's territory as possible for "Greater Serbia."

Bosnia was a patchwork quilt of ethnic and religious groups-44 percent Muslim,31 percent Serb, 17 percent Croat. Its spiritual and political center was elegant, richly historic Sarajevo. For 500 years, the city's diverse population had lived in remarkable harmony-interrupted by outbreaks of nationalist fury like the one that sparked World War I, when Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip killed Austria-Hungary archduke Franz Ferdinand, once again for the idea of the "Greater Serbia." (In 1984,a happier time, Sarajevans hosted the Winter Olympics.)Now the capital withered under a merciless siege; its people crouched in basements and cold apartments, plagued by constant Serbian shelling and sniping, and by shortages of food, medicine and fuel.

Other Bosnian communities were subjected to Serbian "ethnic cleansing."Resurrecting a feud dating to the fourteenth century, when Muslim Turks conquered Serbia, Milosevic's troops emptied entire Muslim and Croat cities, towns and villages. Sometime the Serb soldiers massacred residents outright(like in town of Srebrenica, where Serbs led by general Ratko Mladic, killed 7000 civilians in just a few days);sometimes they consigned civilians to a routine of rape, torture, starvation and slow but certain death in concentration camps. Residents of Prijedor have seen the  worst of those camps: Omarska, Keraterm, Trnopolje, Manjaca and many of them were sent to other concentration camps all over Bosnia. Tens of thousands died. Ones who survived were fired from their jobs, their homes were brutally taken from them and they could have been killed on the street just because some Serb did not like how they looked, spoke or breathed. Finally, they were forced to leave their city, and today, in the city of Prijedor, where ten Years ago lived more than 50 000 Muslims and Croats, only few thousand remains.



DID YOU,DID YOU SEE THE FRIGHTENED ONES?

DID YOU,DID YOU HEAR THE FALLING BOMBS?

DID YOU EVER WONDER

WHY WE HAD TO RUN FOR SHELTER,

WHEN THE PROMISE OF A BRAVE NEW WORLD

UNFURLED BENEATH A CLEAR BLUE SKY?

DID YOU,DID YOU SEE THE FRIGHTENED ONES?

DID YOU, DID YOU HEAR THE FALLING BOMBS?

THE FLAMES ARE ALL LONG GONE

BUT THE PAIN LINGERS ON

GOODBYE,BLUE SKY

GOODBYE,BLUE SKY

GOODBYE

GOODBYE

**Roger Waters**

***‘*The Killing Days’** by Kemal Pervanic

**Kemal Pervanic is a survivor of the notorious Omarska concentration camp which caused international outrage after British journalists uncovered the story in 1992. Kemal now lives in England and is the author of The Killing Days: My Journey Through the Bosnian War.**

I was born in Bosnia in 1968 when ethnicity and religious beliefs didn’t matter. Although my mother identified as a Muslim, I had no religion. ‘Brotherhood and Unity’ was our slogan. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, political groups started to form along ethnic lines and I noticed some of my Serbian neighbours looking at me differently. One schoolmate, who I’d always been on good terms with, suddenly would no longer greet me because I was a Muslim.

Then, in May 1992, the newly named Bosnian-Serb army began targeting Muslims and my village was attacked. I was captured and taken to Omarska camp where the conditions were terrible; there was very little food, no space to sit, and just two toilets for 1000 people. Luckily I was with my middle brother which eased the pain. We didn’t know if the rest of our family were alive or dead.

A lot of neighbours used this situation to settle old grudges. One of the guards was my former language teacher, another a former classmate. Many times people were taken out and tortured; some never returned. When people ask me now, how is it possible for your neighbour to suddenly turn on you, I tell them it takes a long time to prepare people to slaughter their neighbours.

I spent the whole time in a state of terror but I knew to survive I needed to suppress my feelings. I was therefore quite capable of watching someone being slaughtered like a pig without crying. It didn’t mean I didn’t care, but extraordinary circumstances make you react in ways you can’t explain.

After ten weeks three British journalists came to Omarska and the world’s press got hold of the story. As a result, I was transferred along with 1250 survivors to a camp registered by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The facilities were still terrible but I no longer feared for my life. Finally we were released on condition that we leave Bosnia and sign away everything to the newly formed Serbian authority.

When I first arrived in England I couldn’t talk about what had happened. I looked frozen the entire time and didn’t trust anyone. It wasn’t until I heard that my elder brother and parents were still in Croatia and being treated extremely badly, that I finally broke down. At my blackest moments I imagined killing my torturers and feeling absolutely nothing as I did it. Such an act I knew would destroy me. What saved me throughout these years was the support I got from some wonderful people.

Ten years later, I decided to return to my village to ask my former neighbours why they’d taken part in the violence. I managed to meet up with two of my former teachers. One of them seemed full of remorse and said he’d never wanted to participate in the Serb National Project but the other one I didn’t believe. He’d been an interrogator in the camps and had clearly enjoyed the job. He wanted me to say that I forgave him but at that time I couldn’t forgive him because he showed no remorse.

Back in England I suffered my second breakdown. Returning to my village had been traumatic - my past had been destroyed, the place just grass and rubble. But although I was traumatised, I wasn’t filled with hatred. I didn’t decide not to hate because I’m a good person, I decided not to hate because hating would have finished the job they’d started so successfully. It would have poisoned me.

Then something strange happened. One cold January morning, I was in the shower when suddenly I found myself saying, ‘I forgive you’. Year after year I’d carried the memory of the perpetrators on my shoulders – so when this moment in the shower came I felt a huge release.

It wasn’t a conscious decision to forgive, something just changed inside me. Perhaps it was because my father’s recent death had inspired me to do some private healing by getting in touch with former girlfriends and apologising in case I’d unintentionally hurt them. Perhaps I forgave because I realised death can come at any time and take away the opportunity to make up.

Recently when I went back again to Bosnia, I recognised a former camp guard standing by the road hitch-hiking and I started laughing. My friend couldn’t understand why I was laughing but what else could I do? I didn’t want to swear or scream or get violent. I laughed because I remembered the monster this man had been, but now, hitch-hiking alone on a dusty road, he looked almost pitiful. That’s what they call the banality of evil.

People describe these people as monsters, born with a genetically inherent mutant gene, but I don’t believe that. I believe every human being is capable of killing.

The violence continues
by Kemal Pervanic

An Omarska camp survivor believes holding Bosnian Serb institutions accountable for genocide is as important as prosecuting those who perpetrated the crime.

Until April 1992, life in Bosnia was peaceful. People of different nationalities lived side by side and often inter-married. Then suddenly, neighbour turned on neighbour and the butchery began. Amongst those involved were Mladjo Radic, Miroslav Kvocka, Dragoljub Prcac, Zoran Zigic and

Milojica (‘Krle’) Kos - now convicted as the Omarska Five, but then just regular men about town.

Before the war, I regularly encountered three of these men during my trips to Omarska. As a pupil at the local primary school, as a customer at a local barber below Omarska police station, and as a passer by in the streets of Omarska, they were familiar faces. That fateful spring of 1992 these same

individuals became part of the most sinister policy one group can visit upon another - that of annihilation.

During my stay in the Omarska camp, I witnessed these three individuals behaving like gods, showing neither mercy nor restraint towards their captives. I saw Prcac arriving on duty early in the morning, nonchalantly carrying his briefcase as if he were arriving on ordinary police duty at Prijedor police station. While we feared to look into their eyes, they laughed arrogantly, sneering at the ‘scum’ running sheepishly to the canteen for a daily ration of beatings and lukewarm cabbage-water garnished with peas.

They had their own system of justice, which they believed they would never have to answer for. But they made one big mistake. They didn't kill us all. The policy of annihilation was incomplete. And so, today, they face their former victims in disbelief: who would have thought those parchment-skinned captives would survive to tell this incriminating tale?

I doubt they ever anticipated that their turn at incarceration would come. But their stay in The Hague has been humane. They receive food that satisfies their hunger, clothes appropriate to the weather, medical attention, uninterrupted sleep, and the respect of being addressed by their names. These were luxuries they denied me and my 5,000-plus inmates throughout our two-and-a-half month sojourn in Omarska.

While they are treated as human beings with rights and entitlements, under their ‘management’ in Omarska, I was made to feel that I was not entitled to live. I wonder if they ever ask themselves, ‘God, how did our victims feel under our torment?’ Do they even recall the details of what they put us through? Do they ever silently regret their involvement in the war crimes that took place in Omarska, or the war-crime planned on a larger scale: Bosnia minus Muslims equals Greater Serbia?

I expect their main response is one of resentment. Their detention in The Hague has probably become an opportunity for them to hate us even more, blaming us for being there. It is ironic that perpetrators of crimes often blame their victims for their acts of aggression and cruelty. Such a system of logic enables the authors of heinous acts of violence to believe they are the victims while we are the deceitful victimizers.

I would like to ask the Omarska Five personally, What do they think of us now? This is important to me because it was clear during our incarceration at Omarska that they were not really reflecting on what they were doing. Now that they have the time, I wonder if there is any more clarity or whether they are still blinded by self-serving bigotry.

The testimonies about how these men in Omarska treated people sound horrific, but the cruelty did not stop there. The type of justice being meted out at The Hague is delivering yet another blow to a still septic wound. When their trials started, the Omarska Five pleaded not guilty to all charges, which included murder, torture and beating, sexual assault and rape, harassment, humiliation, psychological abuse and confinement in inhumane conditions. One of the accused - unusually - pleaded not guilty with ‘faith in justice and in God’, while the others pleaded ‘not guilty’ or ‘absolutely not guilty’.

One might foolishly hope that if an individual had certain convictions he would maintain them till the end. But no, it seems the Omarska Five have lost their previously fervently held convictions, or suffer from a rare virus that causes selective amnesia. They claim they had nothing to do with the several thousand deaths at Omarska. There is, of course, one other explanation, namely that these individuals are cowards and brutes whose ‘bravery’ was limited to the torture of helpless people when no one but their victims could witness their crimes. Whatever explanation you prefer, one truth stands out: they believed they would get away with it.

When Radoslav Krstic, the general involved in the Srebrenica massacre, was convicted for genocide I felt no joy, even though I believed his conviction represented an acknowledgement of the crimes of Bosnia's Serbian aggressors. Following the conviction of the Omarska Five for their involvement in war crimes in the Omarska concentration camp from May to August 1992 - and

sentenced late last year to prison terms ranging from 5 to 25 years - I realized that it did not matter to me whether they received life sentences or just five years. It was important simply that they were tried and convicted based on evidence presented in the court. But I still feel dissatisfied.

During the aggression against Bosnia many individuals like the Omarska Five became involved in crimes against humanity. To expect all of them to be prosecuted is unrealistic. We would need another thousand years of trials to reach all those who stained their hands with the blood of the innocent. But the fact that The Hague was established to prosecute and try individuals from former Yugoslavia does not convince me that it was established for the purpose of justice.

This is because the world seems to be trying to convince the victims that a bunch of wayward individuals brought about all the carnage, as if no institution stood behind those crimes. I believe that attempts to prosecute individuals before establishing collective responsibility is futile, and was

doomed to failure from the start. The identification of institutions guilty of war crimes is the prerequisite for a systematic and thorough prosecution of the individuals who inspired, led and staffed them. Trying individuals as war criminals while still recognizing their creation in the form of the Republika Srpska is an insult not just to their victims but to our capacity for logic.

Imagine that individual Nazis led by Hitler are charged and tried at Nuremberg, while their legacy of occupied Europe, ‘New Germany’, is legally recognized. It would be the worst kind of insult to the millions of Holocaust survivors and their relatives. It would force survivors of genocide, if they wished to return, to go back to a territory created by the genocide that forced them to flee. If we prosecute individuals while leaving the loots of their genocide undisturbed, we legitimate genocide as a means to an end.

By so doing in Republika Srpska, we sentence future generations, living there and in the Bosnian Federation, to the decades of conflict that inevitably follow an incomplete process of justice. The world seems to want the survivors of genocide, rather than the perpetrators, to compromise their

security. Again? Wasn't the arms embargo they imposed on Bosnia enough?

It is of paramount importance to arrest and try the main perpetrators of the war crimes that took place in Bosnia, including Zeljko Meakic, former commander of Omarska, and Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, who should be charged for their individual involvement in the deaths of so many innocent people. But this should take place after the institutions they represented have been pronounced accountable for genocide. Without these two separate processes, true reconciliation will never take place on Bosnian soil that is still so deeply sullied with the blood of

those who formerly lived and worked there. Those who have been convicted for the crimes at Omarska were not simply five criminals who scourged the country with their violence; they were zealous agents of a programme that aimed to rid Bosnia of Bosnians - that is, of those who believed it possible to live together. By failing to nullify the legitimacy of Republika Srpska, we continue to oppress these men's victims. Call it institutionalized violence by omission.

 Kemal Pervanic spent seven months as a prisoner at Omarska camp. He is the author of The Killing Days: My Journey Through the Bosnian War and runs Bosnia-Herzegovina Community UK, a refugee association. This comment appeared in IWPR'S Tribunal Update No. 251, Part One, 30 January 2002

***‘*The Killing Days’** by Kemal Pervanic

**Foreword**

There’s a point when every conflict comes to an end…and somebody always survives. Every conflict has its survivors who live to tell their story, and I will survive this one.

These are the words of Kemal Pervanic, the author of this chilling and powerful book.

We should be thankful that his prediction from his time in Omarska camp during the Bosnian War came true.

The Killing Days is a moving book recalling a terrible and shameful period in Europe’s history. All the more so because its simple language recalls the experiences not of a politician, or a general, or a journalist, or an analyst of war, but one of many hundreds of thousands of anonymous victims of the grand designs of Balkan leaders.

What happened to Kemal Pervanic happened to countless others whose stories may never be told. And to countless more in Kosovo, whose fate is now slowly being disintered with their remains from the Balkans’ latest killing fields.

I was the first person to get into Manjaca camp during the Bosnian War, having been threatened by Serb generals who tried to stop me that if I went there I would be shot. I saw the prisoners who had previously been in Omarska. Maybe Kemal was among them, though we never met. Certainly the terrible experiences of the prisoners there, of which Kemal writes so movingly, was etched into every one of the emaciated faces I saw — and they haunt me still.

It is a sad irony that within a few years of the end of the Bosnian conflict the Balkans are again in turmoil. I only hope that at last we will learn, and that the experiences of Kemal — and again of thousands like him in Kosovo — will never be repeated in the name of political or ethnic advantage.

To read this book is to understand, painfully, the human consequences of our failures in the Balkans and the historical necessity of ensuring we never repeat them.

**The Rt Hon Paddy Ashdown MP, London 1999**

**Preface**

I remember the Bank Holiday weekend at the end of May 1992 with great clarity and affection. Sunny afternoons in the garden and walks along The Backs in Cambridge. An outing to the cinema. The excitement of making a home with my partner, recently arrived from Canada. Europe at the end of the twentieth century - with all its material comforts and cultured rituals. At the same time, just two hours by plane from that placid scene, a young man (no less European) was witnessing the destruction of a centuries’ old way of life as his former schoolmates and drinking buddies turned on their neighbours with an inexplicable savagery - swiftly putting paid to all those confident high school history lessons that had taught us ‘Never Again in Europe!’

Kemal Pervanic is a thirty-one-year-old Bosnian refugee who arrived in the United Kingdom at the beginning of 1993. He had survived almost seven months of brutality, terror and hunger in Omarska and Manjaca - two of the prison camps which the then-triumphant Bosnian Serb political and military leadership had established in Northern Bosnia. The existence of these squalid, deadly places in Europe’s heartland had shocked the Continent for a brief media moment toward the end of that hot summer of 1992. But it is doubtful that many of us have as yet taken the full measure of the damage which these accursed camps and their catalogue of horrors have done to the integrity of our European human rights and humanitarian law traditions. Something crucial to modern European self-perception died at places like Omarska and Srebrenica. As historian Michael Ignatieff has written of the Bosnian conflict, ‘no one who was there will ever believe in Europe again...’

Kemal Pervanic’s memoir of his time as an inmate of Omarska and Manjaca is a vital and compelling act of resistance. Resistance against forgetting; resistance against the reduction of any human being to the status of a disposable object; resistance against those who insisted on seeing the war in Bosnia as the inevitable explosion of deeply-rooted and implacable ethnic hatreds which could only find resolution in partition and segregation. On one level, what is extraordinary about this book is its very ordinariness. For this is the story of a young man from a village indistinguishable from scores of others which suffered the same lightning-quick dissolution of common life during the first months of the war in 1992. It is written - with remarkable poise and control - by a young man who had never thought of himself as an author or a historian, and who was indeed to become first person from his village to receive a university degree after his release, resettlement and rehabilitation in Britain.

We have had accounts of various aspects of the Bosnian conflict from foreign journalists, academics, or standard-bearers for the benighted ‘international community’ - frequently with greater or lesser helpings of ego attached. From Bosnia itself, we have had a number of moving and incisive meditations on the war from intellectuals, poets, and home correspondents. Many of these books and articles have been peppered with testimony from the grassroots and from individual victims of appalling human right violations. But ‘The Killing Days’ is surely one of the few first-hand, comprehensive records yet produced by an ordinary Bosnian citizen who endured a particularly bleak chapter of his country’s tragic dismemberment.

With commendable economy and understatement, Kemal Pervanic recalls how thousands of Bosnian Muslims, Croats, and a few dissenting Serbs were beaten, tortured, starved and murdered at the hands of their captors during those first bloody months of the conflict. Although it is a primarily a story of the wholesale destruction of the Bosnian Muslim society of the Prijedor-Kozarac region, Kemal’s book is a lament for the violent disappearance of a way of life which transcended what he personally regards as the artificial boundaries of religious or national identity.

First and foremost, Kemal’s memoir is a narrative of grief at the loss of fundamental humanity which these camps represented. It is a narrative which does not concern itself with the priorities of nationalists or ethnic purists of any stripe - apart from his evident disgust at their stupidities. Like the poet and journalist Rezak Hukanovic’s otherwise very different book about the Omarska nightmare, ‘The Killing Days’ makes plain that while the camps were an integral part of the Bosnian Serb national project - those who carried out its ugly demands with the greatest conviction should be viewed more precisely as individual thugs or gangsters rather than embodiments of collective identity.

Shakespeare wrote that ‘the private wound is the deepest’ - a judgement that applies to the fate of the Prijedor-Kozarac region during the summer of 1992 with astonishing accuracy. For in this corner of the country, the ferocity of the maiming and killing which took place in the name of the Republika Srpska was often directly related to the intimacy of the tormentor and the tormented. Nothing shocks and chastens more in this book than Kemal’s roll call of those with whom he had once attended primary school, drank in some village pub, or chatted in a local barber shop - but who then in an instant were transformed into camp guards or agents of terror. The avenging of imagined slights or wrongs among former neighbours and the settling of old scores between families lent the cruelties of Omarska an especially chilling dimension which ‘The Killing Days’ captures in all its painful detail.

But at the core of this chronicle of seemingly limitless inhumanity, there is also resilience and a streak of very dark comedy. The tenderness and generosity between Kemal and his brother, and their fears for their mother’s safety; the quiet dignity of broken men who could not be certain they would live to see another day; the frantic compilation of improvised recipe collections among inmates struggling to keep some memory of home and family alive; the surreal image of the inmates’ half-shaven heads after a power cut brings their mass hair clipping session to a sudden halt - these are as much at the heart of this book as the random acts of violence and the body counts which punctuated each and every day at Omarska.

Kemal even manages to have even tremendous fun at the expense of his pompous captors - sending up the absurd paranoia of local chieftains possessed by visions of grand Islamic conspiracies; the comic book patriotism of the shabby impresario who leads the inmates in enforced choral singing in the camp; and the officer who dreams of a boat built by Muslim slave labour, but whose statelet inconveniently lacks a seacoast. But it is the unforgettable moments of compassion and even creativity in the midst of despair that most distinguish this book - the ingenuity of the artist/craftsmen of Manjaca as they fashion beautiful objects out of bits of wood; the gentle tending of the wounded and the sick in the stinking, overcrowded rooms of Omarska; and most especially, Kemal and his brother parting with their last, carefully hidden Deutschmarks in a futile attempt to ransom a condemned man from hideous, certain death.

Editing this book with Kemal over a three-month period at the end of 1998 has taught me much about the reach of the human spirit. The absence of hatred for his captors or a desire for revenge against those who took everything from him - which is so apparent throughout this book - has been confirmed many times over in our conversations. Kemal’s aspirations in writing this book - in a language he scarcely knew six years ago - were never self-consciously literary, but moral. Like Primo Levi, he emerged from his imprisonment determined to tell the truth about what he had known in the grim, unsparing universe of the camps.

One day as we worked together on the book, I asked Kemal what he would say today to some of those former schoolmates who had stood guard over him at Omarska were he to meet them face to face. With startling frankness, he told me that in his darkest moments - when he thinks of those who destroyed his home and his world and the lives of so many relatives and friends - he sometimes imagines what it would be like to murder them in turn. He told me ‘I can actually see myself killing them - I watch myself doing it - and I feel nothing as I prepare to do it, or while I am doing it, or after the killing is done. But then ... I realise that I do not need to do this - that I do not want to do this - that in doing this, I would lose myself completely - lose everything that I am ... And then, I just feel privileged.’

Words such as these are unflinching in their acknowledgement of the scale of the crime committed and the depth of the sorrow and anger of those who survived. And yet, at the same time, they speak to a readiness to break the cycle of violence, to a capacity to allow ourselves, in Seamus Heaney’s words, to ‘... hope for a great sea-change on the far side of revenge.’ Kemal’s brave words - his desire for justice rather than vengeance - and the book he has written have certainly left me with at least a fragile hope that Europe might just one day learn something from the legacy of this terrible century. In giving us his story in these pages, it is we who become the privileged ones.

**Dr Brian Phillips, Amnesty International**

**Synopsis**

‘The Killing Days’ is a true story, recounting my experiences as a Bosnian Muslim inmate of the infamous Serb-run concentration camps at Omarska and Manjaca during the first seven months of the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The book is written in a simple, understated style, avoiding hyperbole and overt politicisation of the story - despite the shocking brutality which the book describes.

‘The Killing Days’ is written in three distinct sections.

**Part One, The Attack**, begins shortly before the assault on my village, when we were attacked and rounded up by former neighbours - suddenly claiming never to have been our neighbours - as the nightmare of ethnic cleansing got underway. It describes a frightening and often bizarre series of events which unfolds as former friends and colleagues swagger among us - suddenly all-powerful, armed and volatile, as they begin taking away intellectuals, professionals and other local public figures to be killed. Yet nothing that happened in those few days prepared me, or prepares the reader, for the horrors to come in Omarska.

**In Part Two, Omarska**, I describe how we attempted to adjust to our new, almost unbelievable situation. At first, nobody could quite comprehend the brutality of conditions in the camp; but we soon realised that the killings would not stop and there were no signs that we would be released.

In two and a half months, over three thousand people were murdered in the most terrifying, arbitrary manner, and most of us were beaten and tortured.

It is impossible to explain, even convey adequately the overall truth of the camp. I can only write what I know. My approach is to describe everyday experiences, sketch the characters of fellow prisoners and recall stories that cast some light on this darkness. These stories convey the anarchy in which we were forced to live - never knowing when we might eat, or who would be next to die.

After the first foreign journalists visited Omarska and wrote about our plight, I was among 1,350 people transferred to the camp at Manjaca, where prisoners were at last registered with the International Red Cross. Here, we were given basic food and clothing, and for the first time believed that we might survive.

**Part Three, Manjaca**, describes life in this more ‘organised’ camp - where although we were neither criminals nor enemy soldiers, but rather randomly selected civilians, everyday life was more like what many people imagine a prison camp to be.

It is amazing how inventive people can become when they know at last they have a good chance of survival. Normal human activities began to re-appear in Manjaca, such as trading in cigarettes and food, working (local Serbs used Muslims to build them an Orthodox Christian church in the forest), wood carving and, understandably, trying to escape. Also, as people do in such situations, we soon split into hierarchies - ordinary detainees and those favoured by the kitchen staff, for example.

The message that I received from my brother Asim while at Manjaca. It was the first confirmation I had that my family were still alive. It reads:

" Hello brother. our old man and I are alright. mother arrived and is here with us in Zagreb. She is alright. Many greetings from us."

**Finally,** the book ends with our release, at the point where we were expelled from Bosnia altogether - crossing temporarily into neighbouring Croatia before beginning a new life outside the region.

My brother Kasim at the Red Cross Centre flat in Newcastle shortly after our parents' arrival in the UK. He is now staying in Holland.

Case Study: Kemal Pervanic

Kemal Pervanic was born in 1968 and grew up in Bosnia. He was a Muslim whose school contained both Serbs and Muslims in mixed classes. Ethnicity was never an issue. However, as the former Yugoslavia began to fall apart, differences between people throughout the region were accentuated and political groups formed along ethnic lines. In March 1992, Radovan Karadzic and his followers established ‘Serbian’ Bosnia-Herzegovina and the newly named ‘Bosnian-Serb army’ began targeting Muslims within Kemal’s region. His village put up no opposition to the forces but the men were rounded up, including Kemal and his brother Kasim, and sent to a concentration camp at Omarska. He spent seven months here and in a subsequent camp at Manjaca in the most atrocious conditions, with hardly any food and where casual murders and beatings were regular occurrences. Both guards and prisoners came from the same neighboring towns – both Serbs and Muslims. In this extract from his book, Kemal writes about one particular feature of camp life: “Some of the guards were unknown to me, but most were our neighbors, former schoolmates, classmates, even a desk mate. At first, they seemed ill at ease. There was some kind of hesitation and tension in their behavior. They asked no questions and didn’t talk too much. They were neither aggressive nor abusive. I had known some of the guards personally…..Before I was brought to the camp, I had known Milan for thirteen years. During my primary school days in Omarska, he had been my desk mate for a couple of years. I didn’t want anyone to recognize me. All I wanted was to be invisible. I didn’t want him to say anything to me – but when he did, I prayed our exchange would end with this brief greeting. I didn’t want his fellow guards to notice me. I didn’t want them to ask him, ‘Who is the guy you just greeted?’ I was not in a position to ignore them. I didn’t want to discover what their reaction would be if I remained silent. Still, it was better to hear ‘hello’ than ‘hey, you – [dot, dot, NEVER AGAIN, AGAIN Trnpolje Camp, Bosnia, reported in New York Times, 14-01-96 Kemal Pervanic in 2006.

Extract from ‘The Killing Days: My Journey Through the Bosnian War’ by Kemal

Pervanic, published by Blake, 1999

Even when such encounters took place without the other guards present, I strictly avoided it. When Milan came across me in the corridor leading to Room 24, I wanted to turn away and go straight back to my room. I was unable to. My former schoolmate was standing here in front of me. He wore olive-green army trousers and a shirt with sleeves rolled up above his elbows. In one of his hands, he held a rifle. Such a bizarre situation. ‘Hi, Kemo.’ He said. ‘Hi.’ Was this what the conflict was all about? Attack your neighbors. Kill your neighbors. And if somebody survived, you say to them: ‘Hi. I know we had lived together, had attended the same schools together, had played football together, had had drinks together many a time, but you must understand – this is nothing personal. My loyalty to my people comes before humanity – before friendships.’ Milan didn’t have to say that. I knew that’s what he meant. ‘Is [‘Expert’] in here?’ He was looking for another classmate of ours who had been given that nickname by our biology teacher many years before. ‘He’s in that room over there,’ I pointed over his shoulder to Room 15. ‘I have to go now. I’m not allowed to stay in the corridor.’ I wanted him to go to hell. Before they attacked us, I thought we had had respect for each other. Ten days before the attack, I had talked to Milan – at the filling station in Omarska owned by his grandfather. He’d acted as I everything had been normal, while at home he had probably been keeping the same gun he now held in his hand.”

Finally, Gradiska. To reach the bridge, the column needed to pass through the town centre - swarming with a hostile crowd shouting for our blood. Some spat at the bus windows, others threw stones, and the police made no effort to keep the crowd away from the column. Negotiations were taking place on the bridge, and we had no choice but to wait. Suddenly, glass on one of the windows of my bus shattered. Somebody from the crowd had fired twice. Fortunately, nobody was hurt. I was amazed when I realised that I felt no fear inside me of being hurt. The first buses started crossing the bridge.

Over the bridge, I spotted the first UN forces deployed in the area. They were from Jordan, and were charged with monitoring any breaches of the cease-fire - signed by Serbs and Croats almost a year before this day. The first signs of dusk appeared, and the column was heading deeper into Croatian territory. Along the road were only ruins of what once used to be houses. Several kilometres after crossing the bridge, there was not a single sign of any kind of civilian life around. Jordanian soldiers waived to us from their barracks. I had no emotions. No sadness, no joy. Just vast emptiness inside me. I despised the world I left behind me. I despised the world I was approaching. I hated the world that let all of this happen. But this hatred was silent. The world I was entering into was not the same world as the one I had known in peace time. I was being deported from my country. It probably saved my life. But what was my life now anyway? I did not want to die, but I still felt no enthusiasm for the life ahead of me. I guess I was like an animal being released into wilderness after years of confinement. There was a huge hole in my life.

I felt I had been a coward for not having defended my home and my country, even though I had not been given any such opportunity. I felt I was a different kind of human being after these last seven months. Nothing was going to be the same again.

Close to the line of separation between the Zagreb government forces and the rebel Serbs another group of buses waited for us. The column finally stopped. We started disembarking from the buses. Crossing the line, we were welcomed by members of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), who put us onto new buses.

‘Good evening.’ Those before me greeted the new bus driver with smiles on their faces. I just passed him moving toward one of the back seats. I was in no mood to talk. I was a man in no-man’s land. This is where I wanted to stay. I wanted everybody to go ahead and grab their freedom and leave me alone in this land where there was no need to seek independence from others. I wanted to stay in the land where there were no ambitious administrations that could screw up my life to satisfy their own sick ambitions; the land where there were no profiteers using all possible means just to enrich themselves. I was sick of all the people of this world. Man was the most disgusting creature on earth. A blind idiot crushing everything he steps on without looking back at the damage he had done. For seven long months I had wanted to escape from people. All I wanted was just five minutes on my own.

‘Hey, chief. Could we hear some news on the radio?’ Somebody wanted to hear news that five minutes later would be an insignificant piece of history.

‘Yeah. Sure.’

‘They were killing indiscriminately. They tortured and killed thousands of people. Each night there were thirty to forty men murdered.’A familiar voice was giving an interview to reporters on a Croatian radio station.

Words of warning by that good ICRC fellow - that it might be dangerous for those staying behind if we talked to the press - obviously had no meaning for the man being interviewed. He was a free man. Crossing the line, he instantly forgot the world behind. He forgot the men still waiting for their release. Looking quietly through the window, I could only ask myself one last time,

‘Will we ever learn?’

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Earlier that year my village, Old Kevljani, had been just another small and quiet place. On the morning of Thursday, 21 May, everything seemed as usual. It was a very pleasant and sunny spring day.

Around 01.30 pm Mama started to prepare lunch. I was hanging around the house and my brother Kasim was somewhere in the village. Suddenly, somebody was running and shouting,

‘Two thousand Chetniks are moving north of the village.’

It was the news everyone had been expecting - but hoping would never reach our ears. The place where the Chetniks had been reported was to the north, about one kilometre away from my house. It was not possible to see them from my place as a thick layer of woods concealed them from sight.

For the last two months, on the face of it, life in the region seemed normal. But in reality we could all feel signs of coming trouble. My village was more quiet than usual. There was something unpleasant about the quietness. I could not hear people calling each other to leave their gardening and come for a cup of coffee. The biggest sign of change was that there was no noise of children playing. The village was completely silenced. It was not normal for a place like Kevljani to be so quiet.

In better times, the population of Old Kevljani had numbered around six hundred. The village was set between the railway line in the south and the Prijedor-Banja Luka highway in the north. We were the most eastern Muslim village in the Prijedor district, situated at the edge of the territory populated dominantly by the Serbs. On three sides, we were surrounded by the Serbs. The only direct route leading to Kozarac, the largest Muslim town in the region, was a road running north-east towards the highway. All other routes led directly to Serb villages.

All the houses in the village, about one hundred houses, were lined along three main roads which met in the village centre. I lived with my parents and two older brothers in the central part of the village called Srednja Mahala. Mama, Kasim and I were still at home, while my father and elder brother worked in Zagreb, the Croatian capital. Serbian attacks on towns in northern Bosnia, Bosnian Posavina, had closed all routes for their safe return home.

Kasim had worked in Croatia, too, but several months earlier he had decided to quit and come home. As for myself, like many other young people of my generation, for the last three years I was caught in a wide-spread trap of unemployment. Some people had decided not to wait and see whether the Serbs would carry out their threats. Instead, they packed their bags and left the village.

Once I heard the news of the Serbs’ approach, I ran to the woods above our house. When I arrived there, I heard some voices coming from behind the bushes. Looking very carefully in that direction, I recognised two of my neighbours. They had heard the same news and had also decided to come and investigate for themselves. We remained hidden in the green part of the woods where nobody from the other side could see us. Beyond the woods there was a vast clear area of farm-land, and we could see some figures moving along a road at its far end. They were some four to five hundred metres away. From this distance it was impossible to recognise faces. The pair of binoculars I had was of very little help. I could only see their automatic weapons and the olive-green JNA (Yugoslav People’s Army) uniforms. They did not try to hide. I had a feeling they wanted to show us who was controlling the whole situation. Behind them there was a forest, and it was possible more of them could have been hiding there.

Some three kilometres further east was the main Serb stronghold of Omarska, and my neighbours decided to move on to the part of the woods facing it to see if there were other Serbs coming from that direction.

‘You stay here,’ they said. ‘More men should join you soon.’

Waiting for others to arrive, I wondered if there was a way we could defend ourselves. Most of us had gone through a compulsory period of National Service - where we had been given some basic training in handling infantry arms such as Kalashnikovs or semi-automatic rifles. We had not been trained for a conflict of this nature. But we had no arms - not even rifles - nor any kind of military organisation. We were just a bunch of villagers at a loss as to what to do. The Serbs had always dominated the JNA and they had appropriated both the JNA’s small and heavy weaponry.

During the last couple of days, the village had been preparing to send women and children to Kozarac in case of an emergency. While I was on my way to the woods, our neighbour Hasnija came to our house and told Mama that women, children, and the elderly were being evacuated. In all this panic and confusion, Kasim told her to leave the village immediately. Hugging him in tears she said,

‘My dear son, are we ever going to see each other again?’

As Mama was leaving for the village centre, Kasim remembered that I had some money with me. It was always with one of us in case we had to run. He thought it might be of greater help to her than to the two of us. He ran to the woods to take it from me, but by the time he was back in the village she was already gone. She had had just enough time to put her shoes on. Minutes later, Kasim was back in the woods. The whole family was dispersed now. Two of us were still in the village. Mama was in Kozarac not knowing where she was going to spend the coming night; and my elder brother and father were in Zagreb - which seemed to be on another planet.

Meanwhile, three other young neighbours arrived in the woods, too. They said several other groups had taken positions at other places around the village.

‘I will stay here with them. You go home and feed the animals,’ Kasim said to me. ‘They have not been given any food since morning.’

I left them behind to observe movements of the Serbs through binoculars. Using the longer path home, I passed by the other groups our neighbours had mentioned. I wanted to know how long they intended to stay there. All of them told me they were going to guard the village during the coming night from their present positions. Back home everything looked so sad. In the kitchen there was a pie covered by a tray that Mama had made just before she fled. It was still warm. Next to it were freshly roasted coffee beans. The house looked ghostly, as if suddenly all life had disappeared without a trace. It was like a scene from the ‘Twilight Zone’. Barking dogs were the only sounds that could be heard in the village.

I fed the animals and gave them some water. Halfway through the job, I noticed a small group of the villagers I had left behind in the woods coming back to Kevljani.

‘Why are you coming back? Weren’t you supposed to stay there all night?’ I wondered what made them change their minds so suddenly.

‘It’s not too safe to stay there in the dark,’ they said. ‘We don’t have enough weapons to defend ourselves if the Chetniks decided to attack tonight.’

‘Well’ I thought, ‘it doesn’t really matter whether they attack by day or by night. Whichever they do we have no weapons to stop them.’ Nevertheless, I thought these men should have remained in the woods - if only to alert everybody in the village.

I went back inside the house to get something to eat. Soon, Kasim came back home, too.

‘What would you like to eat?’ I expected him to be hungry as he had not eaten anything for some seven or eight hours.

‘I’m not hungry,’ he replied.

‘What are you going to do tonight?’

‘We’re going to watch closely all the approaches to the village.’

‘Should I go too?’

‘It would be better for you to stay at home, and when I get tired around midnight you can replace me until morning.’

The rest of the night went on without any incidents. After the excitement of the previous day and a sleepless night, everyone fell asleep the following morning. Nobody thought that the Serbs would begin their attack at first daylight. Fortunately, the morning passed quietly.

The problems that we, the Muslims of the Kozarac region, were facing were also well known to the Muslims of Brdo - a group of villages set on the western side of Prijedor town. Since the Serbs had ousted Prijedor’s legally-elected government some weeks earlier, they now demanded that the non-Serb populations accept their rule. Both we, the Muslims of the Kozarac region and those from Brdo, rejected such an option because we knew what had happened to the Muslims in the Drina Valley - where some people were massacred and others expelled. After the coup in Prijedor, no-one could trust the Chetniks.

While we rested in our village after the sleepless night, on the other side of Prijedor five Serb soldiers in a vehicle approached the checkpoint controlled by the Muslims from Hambarine - a village in Brdo. The checkpoint had been established out of fear that the Serbs might enter their village and massacre their people. The soldiers demanded to be let through. They were told to drive back to where they came from. One of them, thinking that the machine gun would be a better method of persuasion, walked back to the vehicle, took up his gun and blasted fire at the men standing at the checkpoint. They fired back and shot him dead. Two more Chetniks died instantly and two were wounded. The dead body of the unsuccessful negotiator was placed in the vehicle and one of the wounded irregulars drove back towards Prijedor.

In the evening, the Serbs used the radio station in Prijedor to broadcast another ultimatum to the Muslims of Hambarine. They named Aziz Aliskovic, a former policeman, and a group of other men, demanding their surrender by 07.00 am the following morning. None of the men they asked for were present at the checkpoint at the time of the incident. The ultimatum was not met.

The Serb-controlled TV Banja Luka presented a completely different version of the event. One of the wounded soldiers told the TV cameras that he and his colleagues were simply going home from the front in Croatia. The Serbian propaganda had transformed this incident into a deadly plot against all the Serbs by Muslim extremists. The same TV station was used as a vehicle for propaganda which presented the Serbs as being under threat from the Muslims wherever they moved.

Once the demands for delivery of Aziz and the others failed to be met, the deadline was extended until 09.00 am. Two hours later, the silence in Hambarine was broken by two shells landing on the village. It was a warning. The people of Hambarine decided to remain firm in their decision not to deliver a single man. They knew that the casualties at the checkpoint were the result of self-defence, and that the men the Chetniks demanded had not been there at the time of the incident. At 10.30 am, the village came under heavy shell fire. Weapons used for the attack were stationed at the aerodrome at Urije, a suburb of Prijedor. The shell fire was followed by an infantry attempt to overrun Hambarine, but the defenders succeeded in driving them back. The first attempt to capture Hambarine ended in failure. The second try followed soon, but once more they were forced to retreat. The Chetniks resumed with heavy shelling. Ground skirmishes lasted until 07.00 pm.

Entering Hambarine with two tanks and an armoured personnel carrier (APC), the Chetniks forced the locals to withdraw to nearby Kurevo and Ljubija. Some five hundred people, all unarmed civilians, were never given the chance to run for cover. They became the victims of the first mass slaughter in the district.

**end of the excerpt**