

Bloody trail of butchery at the bridge

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HEADLINE: BLOODY TRAIL OF BUTCHERY AT THE **BRIDGE;**

Bosnia the secret war: Traumatized survivors tell Ed Vulliamy of the horrors perpetrated by one man against the people of Visegrad, in eastern Bosnia

BYLINE: Ed Vulliamy

BODY:

THE **bridge** that spans the River **Drina's** lusty current at Visegrad is a Bosnian emblem. **Bridge** on the **Drina** is the title of a great work of literature by the country's most celebrated author, Ivo Andric, a Nobel prize winner.

In Andric's book, the **bridge** is at once backdrop and silent witness to Bosnia's history.

It is a mighty and glorious structure spanning the river at a point where savage, precipitous rocks briefly part, giving way to a verdant valley. The water flowing through its elegant arches is a luminous blend of turquoise and jade. The bridge was built, as the carved inscription proudly declares, in 1571 by order of the Ottoman Grand Vezir Mehmet Pasha, of robust pumice stone hewn by Rade the Mason. "Of all the things that life drives man to shape and build," wrote Andric, "none, I think, is as precious as bridges . . . They serve no arcane or evil purpose."

Andric, who died in 1975, once complained that a house newly built in Visegrad obscured the view of the bridge from his home. The picture postcard above depicts Visegrad in peace time. Had the author lived into the 1990s, he might have been grateful for the obstruction. For in the hidden history of Bosnia's war, the Bridge on the Drina was bloodily defiled.

It was turned into a slaughterhouse – a place of serial public execution – by a man we now reveal as one of the most brutal mass killers of the war.

Virtually unknown, not indicted by the war crimes tribunal, this monster turned the Drina red with the blood of hundreds – maybe thousands – of Muslims murdered on the bridge, whose corpses the bold current swept downriver.

A few of the bodies were rescued from the waters by a teenager, whose quiet testimony begins the unveiling of butchery at the bridge.

JASMIN R's fresh face belies what he knows. Jasmin was evacuated to Dublin last Christmas from a prison camp in Serbia, to which he had fled from the crushed Muslim enclave of Zepa, to which he had fled from Visegrad in 1992.

During his three years at Zepa, Jasmin, aged 14 on arrival, was considered too young to fight. Instead, he was assigned to a hamlet called Slap, a lonely junction between the Drina and Zepa rivers. There his job was to haul bloated corpses out of the Drina's current as it flowed from Visegrad, bring them ashore in a small boat, often under Serbian fire, and give them a proper burial.

"We dug the graves," he says calmly, "and buried 180 people. Some I knew personally, they had been my neighbours in Visegrad." The Bosnian government calculates that probably about one in 20 bodies were salvaged.

Jasmin's companion in this work was Mersud C, now based in a barracks for exiled Zepa soldiers up a front-line mountain in central Bosnia.

"The bodies came," says Mersud, "almost every day. Men and women, old and young. They had been beaten and tortured, they were black and blue, and some had been decapitated. Yes, and there were children. Mostly 10 or 12, and two infants of about 18 months."

Eighty-two corpses were identified. The graves were dug for one, three or five at a time, named or numbered, and ringed by a low fence.

Before the war, Mersud had spent summer evenings with friends on the bridge. "It was the place to meet before going for coffee. I read the Andric book, it was compulsory at school."

The Serbian slaughter of Muslims in eastern Bosnia at the war's inception was largely hidden from prying eyes.

Unknown to the outside world, on August 5 1994 a Serbian soldier from Visegrad called Milomir Obradovic, held prisoner in Muslim Gorazde, told

his captors the story of one man: Milan Lukic. A UN policeman, Sergeant T. Cameron, took notes.

Obradovic told how Lukic paraded around Visegrad with a megaphone, shrieking: "Brother Serbs, it's time to finish off the Muslims" and how Lukic set about achieving this goal.

Lukic, he said, locked men, women and children in houses and incinerated them. He arrived at factories, took employees out and shot them – for a while he kept the wife of one such victim, Igbala Raferovic, as a captive sexual partner.

Lukic tied a man to his car with a tow-rope and dragged him round town until he was dead. One member of Lukic's gang, "The Wolf", raped one of the girls they kept prisoner for the purpose at the Vilina Vlas spa hotel so violently that when the rest demanded their turn the girl, Jasna Ahmedspahic, jumped out of a window to her death.

There were two massacres in May 1992, said Obradovic. At a village called Prelevo, Lukic took men off buses shipping Muslims out of Visegrad, lay them face down and shot them. "There is," confessed Obradovic, "a mass grave at Prelevo."

Another convoy of refugees was stopped by Lukic at Dragomilje, the men again taken and shot. Obradovic told of mass murder on Visegrad's bridge, adding that the killing was sanctioned by the Yugoslav army.

By a cruel twist, Obradovic's captors exchanged him, apparently unaware of his value. The witness was lost. Obradovic has not been heard of since, and any investigator might wonder whether he met the same fate as another Serb official who objected to Lukic's mass murder, Stanko Petcikoza. Obradovic said Lukic murdered him.

But, following the trail of Lukic's bloodlust, the Guardian has reconstructed the case, and found other witnesses to the Visegrad carnage scattered across Bosnia and Europe. Their testimonies interweave like threads in a tapestry. There is no Muslim from Visegrad who does not know what Milan Lukic did on their bridge, and there are very few who do not mourn in his wake.

Mersud the gravedigger knew the man whose victims he pulled from the river; they had been neighbours. Lukic, now about 30, was born in the village of Rujiste, said Mersud, and "seemed a good guy". Another neighbour called Omer, now in Sarajevo, said that Lukic's family had been "fervent Chetniks in the second world war". Lukic moved to Serbia after

leaving high school to keep a cafe in Obrenovac, near Belgrade, but returned as the clouds of war gathered in spring 1992.

Lukic assembled a gang of 15 braves, including his brother Milos, cousin Sredoje, a chum from Belgrade called Deyan Jeftic and a waiter, Mitar Vasiljevic. Before long Lukic committed the first murder in Visegrad's war.

Mirsada K. was at home when she heard a shot next door. The little girl from the household came running to Mirsada's house, saying her mother Bakha Zukic was dead, shot in the back, and her father Dzemo taken. The man who had fired the shot was Milan Lukic: he had taken a fancy to Dzemo's new red Volkswagen Passat, and had made off with both man and car.

Dzemo Zukic was never seen again, but the car became omnipresent. From that day hence – as another witness, Fehima D., said: "If the red Passat arrived at your house, you knew something terrible was about to happen to you." Thus Milan Lukic sparked an orgy of violence which emptied Visegrad of 14,500 Muslims.

The bridge was not the only killing field. Women have survived to bear witness to Lukic's house-burnings. Her hands and face deformed by fire, Zehra T. was the sole survivor of an inferno at Bakovica, above the bridge, on June 27, in which 71 people were incinerated.

Esma K. was herded into a stadium and thence to a house with 60 others. The Passat arrived at 5pm. Within four hours, she said: "The sky was light because the house was in flames." Esma escaped through a window.

A man called Hasan Ajanovic survived a cull of men in the house of a waiter called Meho. Meho had worked alongside Lukic's waiter-henchman Vasiljevic at the Panos restaurant. Six men, including Meho and his son Ekhem, were driven to the riverbank in a convoy led by Lukic and Vasiljevic, where they were lined up and shot. Hasan jumped into the water before he was hit, and was shielded by Meho's floating corpse.

But the bloodiest arena was the bridge itself. The structure is visible from almost every balcony and window in Visegrad, which climbs both sides of the valley. Its cobblestones are a stage at the foot of an amphitheatre; the executions were intended to be as public as possible.

From her balcony, Fehida D. watched. She saw "Lukic, in his Passat, and the trucks behind, arriving on the bridge each evening". The gang would unload their human cargo, and the killing began. "We saw them by day or

by the city lights, whether they were killing men that time, women or children. It took half an hour, sometimes more.”

The Serbs usually stabbed people into various states between life and death before throwing them into the water below. “Sometimes they would throw people off alive,” Fehida recalled, “shooting at the same time. Sometimes they would make them swim a bit, then shoot.”

One witness, Admir H., recalled Lukic enjoying music from the Passat’s radio while throwing two men into the river. “I can’t swim!” protested one of them, Samir, as Lukic fired into the water.

At the end of June a Visegrad police inspector, Milan Josipovic, received a macabre complaint from downriver, from the management of Bajina Basta hydro-electric plant across the Serbian border. The plant director said could whoever was responsible please slow the flow of corpses down the Drina? They were clogging up the culverts in his dam at such a rate that he could not assemble sufficient staff to remove them. The dam is well downriver from Jasmin’s and Mersud’s Zepa graveyard – their 180 bodies were a small fraction of the total.

Hasena M. lived in a first floor flat, 150 yards from the riverbank in Visegrad. By July 15 she had spent 12 days wondering whether her husband Nusret was alive. He had been taken by a Serbian neighbour he had known well, Dragan Tomic, and disappeared.

Hasena set off for work at 6.30, across the bridge as usual, to find Lukic already busy at that unusual hour. “Two young men with their hands tied behind their backs” were being executed to the sound of his car radio.

At lunchtime, Lukic came by Hasena’s factory to promise that the time had come to “finish off the Muslims” remaining in Visegrad. Hasena and her three Muslim workmates left early, electing to take another route home. Looking upriver at the old bridge, they saw 15 men lined up and killed. Terrified, Hasena hid at home for four days with her daughters Nusreta and Nermina, aged eight and six.

In the afternoon of July 19, the red Passat pulled up outside Hasena’s flat, into which her elderly parents and sister had moved. Milan and Milos Lukic, armed with machine guns, kicked the door open. Hasena’s children were playing outside. Their turn had come.

“Milan Lukic said that in the next 15 minutes he would kill us all,” recalled Hasena. She was sent outside to fetch the little girls, but implored her Serbian neighbours to hide them; the neighbours refused. So Hasena and

her girls slipped unheard past her own front door to an empty flat on the third floor.

From there Hasena heard Lukic ask: "Where's the third woman?" She heard her mother Ramiza call for her, but waited. From a window she saw Lukic march her mother and sister Asima out into the Passat, and drive towards the bridge. Hasena followed, to a vantage point near a school.

Halfway across the river, the bridge widens to form a lovely overhang above the current called the Sofa, a Turkish word. Here is a bench of fine flagstones where people can sit comfortably, leaning back against the parapet, which reclines. This was where Hasena used to chat with her friends. But not on July 19.

"I watched them put my mother and sister astride the parapet, like on a horse," Hasena said. "I could hear both women screaming, until they were shot in the stomach. They fell into the water; themen laughing as they watched. The water went red."

This was the beginning of Hasena's calvary. She hid overnight in an empty house with the children, returning home at dawn to seek out her invalid father, who was unable to walk.

"My father said: 'Go. Take the girls, run away. You obviously can't take me. I'll wait here until they come for me. Go.' I looked at him, and then at my girls. I made him some breakfast and he said: 'Come here, my daughter, so I can kiss you the last time.' He kissed me and the girls, and we left him sitting there, alone."

When the Serbs caught up with Hasena, they took her and the girls to a house full of other Muslim women, where they were held captive for two months. Many women from Visegrad say they "shared a house with other women" during that summer. That is all. Some details, if spoken, can destroy any attempt to rebuild life.

On September 13, Hasena was moved. And now her story adds another, fresh name to the grisly list of Serbian concentration camps in Bosnia: Uzamnica.

Hasena was kept in a crowded hangar of this disused barracks for three years, while her daughters lost their childhood. "I used to look at them in the morning, asleep, locked in while the sun was shining outside, and cry."

Uzamnica was a forced labour camp, so that when they were outside Hasena and her girls were working, even six-year-old Nermina. It was hard labour, dawn-to-dusk, planting tomatoes or feeding cattle. The only food the Serbs provided for their Muslim prisoners was forbidden pork.

Lukic was a regular visitor to Uzamnica. "He came every day, wild, saying 'I'll kill you filthy gypsies' " – beating and abusing prisoners at will.

The screams of pain, said Hasena, came mainly from the men's quarters. Each week, convoys of male prisoners would leave the camp, heading into Serbia, never to be seen again. Last October Hasena and her girls were exchanged, and made it to Sarajevo.

Visegrad is now a baleful, watchful town. It is awful to look down at the vigorous current gliding beneath the Sofa and its parapet, and to wonder that this was the last thing those terrified, mutilated people saw as they plunged.

But Visegrad is still home to the Ivo Andric library, the finest collection of his books in the world. The librarian, Stojka Mijatovic, offered us a volume, a gift. "We have taken so many books from Muslim houses we hardly know what to do with them," she said.

Mrs Mijatovic had once presented this very edition of Andric to the library's most regular and best-loved client. Now she had it back, looted from the dead man's house.

"Would you like me to cross out this Muslim name?" she offered. "No thank you." The dedication from the library was to Emir Ajanovic, a relative of the witness to the murder of Osman's father and brother.

Would you ever want to see the bridge again? Osman and Fehida shuddered. "Never."

And Hasena? She shivered. "Never. Not if I lived a thousand years. I wish I could drive that bridge from my mind, but I see it as though I were there now. That bridge will drive me mad."

Looking for Milan Lukic is a dangerous pastime. The bush telegraph informs us that he is now back in Obrenovac, Serbia, and a wealthy man.

It is a drab, faceless town and the glass-fronted Viski Bar he is said to have managed is a comfortless place, scantily patronised and blaring out Montenegrin folk music. An inquiry as to Mr Lukic's whereabouts is met with a stony glare charged with menace, and not sensibly challenged.

But there was one, ominous, recent sighting. A Muslim soldier from Zepa, present at the fall of the enclave in 1995, said he saw Lukic with the Serbian army patrolling the columns of Muslim fighters as they lined up to surrender. He was looking for anyone he recognised, and shouting: "Anyone from Visegrad step out of the line! Anyone from Visegrad!" Even then, it seemed, Lukic's work at the Bridge on the Drina was unfinished.

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