

Safet / 34

Safet Vukalic is a Bosnian Muslim and survivor of ethnic cleansing in Prijedor, Bosnia...

[Safet is standing on a balcony and we can see blocks of flats behind him. He speaks directly to camera.]

I think it was May. I think it was May '92. Initially the soldiers came round that day with guns and there was tanks on the main roads and they said, 'All the men come outside and go on the main road.' They said, 'You'll be questioned.'

My dad and my brother went; my mum was screaming and crying; I was going to go out as well, because I was 16, at the time, and my mum said 'No, you stay home.' When you hear gunshots, you think, what happened? You know they're out there, but you know, you think, have they been killed? And then later on you hear it was one of your neighbours that was killed. A guy who was just a few years older than me. And so his family, they had to go and collect the bodies... it's just really starting to sort of... be hard to talk about, because I'm still seeing those things as well.

We just didn't know what was going to happen with my brother and my dad. And we also stayed a few nights round people's houses. We just, you know, groups of us, you know, a number of families, together in one house rather than alone, because you know they can come round, kill you, you know. And it just felt a bit safer. Just being with a group of people, thinking, well, you know, they're surely not going to come and kill all of us. Even though that's what they were doing.

We eventually found out where they were taken and it was the concentration camp in Keraterm, which I think was a factory before. After that first camp, we heard that my dad was taken to a second camp, which was Omarska. And we heard of all the killings that went on in that camp, and you think, well, they've taken him there to kill him. Simple as that. To me there was no other explanation. He was going to be killed, **and I thought I wasn't going to – I wasn't – I wasn't going to have my dad....** Yeah.

Then we heard a while later that my dad was – that my dad was taken to a third camp which was called Manjaka. You hope that they are on the Red Cross register, they won't, hopefully they won't kill him now. So it was a bit better. My brother was taken to a different concentration camp, which was Trnopolje, and I'd say it was a bit more relaxed in a way that there wasn't as many killings in that camp. And – I mean, the stories we heard from that camp weren't even coming close to the stories we heard about the Omarska camp. Which was the second one that my dad went to. Then he was asked to sign off everything he owned in order to be released.

They were allowed to leave, as long as they agreed to leave for a third country. As in, they were released to Croatia, but they had to leave - they weren't allowed

basically to stay in Croatia or come back to Bosnia, they had to go to a third country. And my dad was one of those people that was picked to go to come and live in UK.

I think it was soon after he was released, and I remember I was sleeping in one room... there was two big bangs that went up one after the other. It was, I'd say, within seconds perhaps. One of the neighbours, he was a Serb, and he was in the Serbian army and he was home at the time, so he came and said, 'Don't worry, I'll go and see what has happened.' He came back and he said, you know, 'The mosque has been destroyed.'

It's a bad thing to say, but it was a relief. You know. Buildings can be rebuilt; lives can't. But it was helpful that, you know, there was just someone who wanted to help. Now, for all I know, he could have done things in other cities, he could have been a war criminal to other people. To me, he wasn't. To me, he was a friend. They were not all the same. Even though they were in the same army, they weren't all the same. If they were, my dad always said, we'd all be dead. They had the weapons to do it.

We left Bosnia on 2 December 1993, and it was – I mean, the snow was about a metre high, you know. Three feet high. And we went – we were taken to the airport, got on a plane, don't really remember how the flight went, and then we were coming above the UK, and as soon as we started going down, I thought wow, everything is green. Where is the snow? And that was the first it sort of hit me what the weather in UK is about.

Yes, it happened. And people think 'oh, it's fine now.' Well, to me, the only thing that's happened, there's no concentration camps, and the war has stopped. Still division exists; the country is divided, my town is in part of that's occupied by Serbs. I see it as occupied, because they rule. I remember first time when I went to visit, my home was still occupied. There was, you know, a family from another side of – another part of Bosnia. And that was again a weird feeling, you know. You can't go to your home that your dad's built from the ground up.

I was a victim of all this. I was an innocent person. And people are victims of crime innocently, you know. Walking down the street, get beaten up, and it is helpful when you've got someone to understand where you're coming from and to say, I understand you. I am here to try and help you. I'm here to listen to you. It means a lot. Sometimes you might not be able to change anything, but at least if I know that at least you understand, and you are in a way on my side, even though you're not able to change anything physically, you are on my side, and I know, OK, there is hope. Not everyone's the same.