

HASAN HASANOVIĆ



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Hasan Hasanović was 19 when the town of Srebrenica fell to Bosnian Serb forces in July 1995. He endured a 100 kilometre march through hostile terrain to escape the massacre of around 8,000 Muslim men and boys that took place there.



'I want to speak to people, and share my story because my heart speaks. And now, finally, someone is listening.'

Hasan Hasanović was born on 7 December 1975 in Bajina Bašta, Serbia. He lived in the village of Sulice, Bosnia, 35 kilometres south of Srebrenica, until the family moved to Bratunac in 1991.

When the Bosnian War started in March 1992, towns in the east of the country came under attack from Bosnian Serb forces. By May, Hasan's family had been forced to move to the Muslim-held enclave around the town of Srebrenica which was to become the first of the United Nations' so-called 'Safe Areas' in April 1993. By this date, the Srebrenica enclave was under siege, cut off from friendly territory to the west and packed with about 60,000 people, mainly Muslim refugees like Hasan from the surrounding area. There was no electricity, very little food, and people were being killed every day by Serb artillery fire.

The Srebrenica enclave fell to Bosnian Serb forces on 11 July 1995. Uninhibited by the presence of Dutch UN peacekeepers, the Serbs commenced the slaughter of around 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys, the worst massacre in Europe since the Holocaust.

Hasan remembers listening to reports from the frontline, expecting the international community to step in and protect them, then being shocked to hear that the UN troops were retreating without offering resistance. Hasan, along with his father Aziz and twin brother Husein, decided to flee. They joined 'the column': between 10,000 and 15,000 Muslim men, mostly unarmed civilians, setting out on a gruelling 100 kilometre march towards the Muslim-held town of Tuzla. The terrain was mountainous and littered with minefields, and many Serb soldiers lay between Hasan and safety: 'It wasn't going to be an easy journey, but we had no other option. We wanted to live.'

The Hasanović men stuck to the middle of the column as it assembled, for safety. But the Serb forces could see the gathering men from their positions on the hills, and opened fire. 'They didn't care that we were unarmed. Their primary concern was that we were Muslim, and they wanted us dead.'

Some men were killed; others scattered in panic. In the confusion Hasan became separated from his father and brother. He wanted to stop and look for them, but he knew that if he did he would likely be killed. 'I could think of nothing but pushing forward. Forward was freedom; forward was survival; forward was everything... I told myself if I wanted to live, I would have to run and not look back.' He would never see his father or brother again.

Hasan fled into the woods with many other men, but by the afternoon of 12 July they had lost contact with the front of the column. They were attacked again, bullets ricocheting off the trees all around. The Serbs were very close. 'I was terribly scared, lost all my strength and threw off the backpack, even the jacket I was wearing. I could not move. But I came across some guys I knew who gave me sugar and water, and all of a sudden it gave me the strength to go on.'

During the night of 12 July Hasan's group caught up with the front of the column, and the exhausted men took a break to rest. 'I couldn't look at anyone. The instinct to survive is a powerful one, but nothing spells death like the face of a helpless man. So, we just looked away from each other.'

The next day the men of the column gathered on Kamenica Hill, about 60 kilometres from Tuzla. The Serbs attacked again, killing thousands that day alone. Hasan hid in the forest once more, whilst Serbs using loudspeakers and stolen UN uniforms attempted to trick them out with promises of food and safety. Those who did give themselves up were made to call their relatives out from hiding. They were then taken away to be murdered and buried in mass graves.

On 14 July those who had escaped the ambush continued their trek through the forest towards Tuzla. Hasan was so tired he slept on his feet as he walked. As they came to a road, someone shouted that a Serb tank was coming. The men fell to the ground and lay still. Hasan was lucky; the Serbs passed by without noticing them.

Later they came to a river and struggled across. 'We weren't soldiers who had prepared for this kind of journey' says Hasan. 'We were just ordinary men.' When he reached the other side, he removed his boots. Days of walking had turned his feet into a blistered mass of agonizing pain. He wanted to lie down and sleep but another man told him, 'If you sleep now, you'll sleep forever'.

The men reached the Baljkovica Valley, agonisingly close to friendly territory. Here they waited nervously while the few armed Muslims exchanged fire with Serb soldiers. Hasan hid in a stream for two hours, weak and delirious from lack of food and water. Finally, they were told to dash across the valley and made it to the free territory of Zvornik. They were welcomed with food and water, and buses lined up to take them to a ruined school, where they slept. The next morning, having walked for five days and six nights, Hasan was driven to Tuzla. 'I couldn't believe I had survived.'

Hasan was one of only 3,500 who survived the march. He remembers arriving at the bus stop in Tuzla and being met by women deported from Srebrenica, desperate for news of their loved ones: 'I was at a loss. I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to upset them, and the truth was that they were probably all dead.' Weeks later Hasan was reunited with his mother and younger brother at a refugee camp at Tuzla airport. He kept hoping that his father and twin brother might still be alive. 'That hope lasted until the first discovery of the mass graves'.

Hasan's father and brother were found in mass graves excavated by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) after the war. Hasan buried his father at the Srebrenica Memorial Centre in Potočari in 2003, and his brother in 2005. He still does not know how and where they were killed.

After the war, Hasan worked as an interpreter for the US army. He then gained a degree in Criminal Sciences, and returned to live in Srebrenica in 2009. Moving back was a painful experience: 'It is hard to live in a town full of emotion. Every street, every building and every house reminds you of what you have survived.'

Hasan is now married and has a young daughter. He works as a Curator at the Memorial Centre, where he shares his story with visitors from all over the world on a daily basis. He sees this as both his duty to those who were murdered and a cathartic experience for himself. 'I want to speak to people, and share my story because my heart speaks. And now, finally, someone is listening.'

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