

Safet Vukalić



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When 'ethnic cleansing' began in his neighbourhood, Safet narrowly avoided being sent to concentration camps with his father and older brother. Safet describes the fear he felt for his family, but the comfort that he had in the support and help from others.



'The Serbian soldiers were not all the same. Some were happy to bring me medication and food, and then there were those that were all too happy to kill and imprison innocent people and keep them in concentration camps.'

Safet Vukalić was born in 1976 in Prijedor, a town in Bosnia. He lived with his parents, older brother and two sisters in a house built by his dad. Bosnia was a diverse country, made up of Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). Safet remembers people in his community living together happily without paying attention to each other's religions or their differences. His best friend at school was Bosnian Serb, and Safet's family were Bosniak.

In 1992 the Bosnian War broke out when Bosnian Serbs resisted Bosnia's independence, fighting instead for 'Republika Srpska' – an independent Serbian state in Bosnia. This led to conflict between Bosnian Serbs and the rest of the population, particularly Bosniaks, who were targeted and persecuted by Bosnian Serb troops.

Bosnian Serb propaganda aiming to spread fear and hatred about the Muslims in Prijedor was shared in local media. Non-Serbs were forced to wear white armbands and put a white flag on their homes, to identify them. One day, Serb soldiers came into town with guns and tanks, demanding that all men who were not Serbs or Orthodox Christians should come outside. They said: 'You'll be taken for questioning then you'll be released.'

Safet remembers his mum screaming and crying as he went to leave the house. He was only 16 so his mum told him 'You stay home, you are a child.' Safet's dad and brother went outside, along with many of their neighbours. Shortly after they left, Safet heard gunshots. He later found out that a neighbour a few years older than himself had been shot and killed. Safet didn't know what was going to happen to his dad and brother and worried that he would never see them again.

After being taken away, the men of Prijedor, including Safet's dad and brother, were taken to a concentration camp in Keraterm. Safet's brother Vahid was badly beaten by a guard on the journey. Upon hearing the news of their arrival at Keraterm, Safet's elder sister Vahida, along with many other women in the area, started to take food to the camp every day. One day, a neighbour was killed by a guard whilst trying to deliver food. Safet's sister didn't get to the camp that day, but she did not give up on taking food parcels as often as she could.

Safet's dad and brother were separated and his dad Rahmo was taken to the notorious concentration camp, Omarska. Upon hearing this, Safet locked himself in the bathroom and cried. He had heard of the torture and killings that went on in Omarska and thought 'They've taken him there to kill him. Simple as that.'

Later, to his relief, Safet heard that his dad had survived and had been taken to a third camp, Manjača. This camp was listed on the Red Cross register so conditions were better and they were hopeful that his dad might be safe.

Following a news report by ITN which showed the condition of the camps, Safet's dad and brother were released because of pressure from the international community. Republika Srpska made them both sign an agreement giving up all of their possessions, including their house and land, to the state. Vahid was allowed to return home, but the agreement releasing Safet's dad and his fellow prisoners from Manjača forced them to leave the country. Safet's dad was eventually sent to the UK with the assistance of the International Red Cross, and arrived in December 1992.

Shortly after Vahid returned, Safet remembers being woken in the night by two big bangs. His neighbour, who was part of the Bosnian Serb army, told Safet to stay inside. He went to check what had happened and reported back, 'The mosque has been destroyed.' Although it was upsetting, Safet felt a sense of relief: 'Buildings can be rebuilt; lives can't.'

Safet recalls how important it was that there were people in his community who wanted to help. Knowing his neighbour was a Bosnian Serb soldier, Safet was cautious and aware that his neighbour could have done things in other cities and could be considered a war criminal. To Safet he was a friend. Reflecting on this Safet says, '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.'

Another of his neighbours, a Serb, refused to join the Bosnian Serb army and take part in the atrocities being committed. He was called a traitor, but Safet was grateful that he stood up for what is right.

After being released from the concentration camp, Safet's brother started working with a charity, driving convoys of food from Zagreb in Croatia to Prijedor. One night, another man working for the charity was beaten by a gang who wanted to steal the trucks and food, and Safet's brother narrowly avoided the same fate, thanks to a Bosnian Serb soldier stopping him at a checkpoint. He was forced to stop his charity work and stay in Zagreb where he felt safer.

Safet's dad worked hard with the Red Cross to reunite the family in the UK. Initially he could only get papers for Safet and his elder sister. They left Bosnia on 2 December 1993. When Safet and his sister were finally reunited with their dad in a hostel in South London, they were overcome with emotion. They had been apart for over a year. They were still worried for the rest of the family, but they were able to come to the UK in 1994.

Safet and his family didn't return to visit Bosnia until 2001. His family home was now occupied by a Bosnian Serb family. Safet and his family started working to prove the house and land was theirs, and that the agreements signed by his dad and brother were not valid. The process was complicated, bureaucratic and expensive to discourage people, but in 2002 Safet and his family regained the ownership of their family home.

Today, the family are all in London, where Safet lives with his wife and two children. He regularly shares his story with Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and other organisations, to ensure that people learn from his experiences.

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The Genocide in Bosnia: hmd.org.uk/bosnia

Life stories of those affected by genocide: hmd.org.uk/lifestories