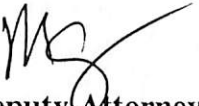


ROUTING AND TRANSMITTAL SLIP		DATE		August 4, 1994	
TO: (Name, office symbol, room number, Agency/Post)			Initials		Date
1. Jamie Gorelick					
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
REMARKS: Re: <u>Serbian Witness (Popovic) re War Crimes</u> Attached is an August 3 memo from Jo Ann Harris giving you the status on the matter involving the Serbian witness. It indicates that CRM is sending people to Hungary this week to interview the man, in order to determine whether assistance is appropriate. P.S. The memo does not accurately describe my conversation with Ambassador Schifter (who is not the Ambassador to Hungary, but rather is - I think - an assistant to Tony Lake). The only thing I told Schifter was that CRM was concerned that it be given an opportunity to determine what Popovic's own role in the war crimes was, so that the US didn't end up paroling in a murderer who was worse than the people he was informing on. Schifter readily agreed that was a reasonable concern, and himself suggested that we send prosecutors to Hungary to conduct interviews. DO NOT use this form as a RECORD of approvals, concurrences, disposals, clearances, and similar actions.					
FROM: (Name, org. symbol, Agency/Post) Merrick B. Garland  Principal Associate Deputy Attorney General U.S. Department of Justice			Room No. - Bldg. 4206-Main DOJ Phone No. 202-514-2105		

Merrick -
I have asked David Margolis
to get us an update.
James

*Recd
DAG
8/4/94*



U.S. Department of Justice

Criminal Division

Assistant Attorney General

Washington, D.C. 20530

August 3, 1994

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DEPUTY ATTORNEY GENERAL

FROM: Jo Ann Harris
Assistant Attorney General
Criminal Division

SUBJECT: State Department Request for Parole and Witness
Protection of Pero Popovic

The State Department has been in contact with INS and the Criminal Division regarding Pero Popovic, a Bosnian Serb who served as a guard at the Serb detention facility at Susica, and who may be able to provide important testimony to the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal regarding mass murders and other atrocities committed at Susica.

Popovic's desire to cooperate with the Tribunal (he was debriefed over a period of two days) has been published in the New York Times and he and the Tribunal's Deputy Prosecutor believe he may be in danger because of his cooperation. The Deputy Prosecutor has communicated to State a request that Popovic be relocated to the United States for his own protection, and about which State has conveyed its enthusiasm. Popovic is currently at, or under the control of, the U.S. Embassy in Budapest, Hungary.

Late this afternoon, Merrick Garland spoke with Ambassador Schifter (Hungary) and outlined the Department's concerns regarding Popovic's parole into the United States which are discussed in detail below. At the conclusion of the conversation, it was agreed that to address these concerns and expedite our consideration of this issue, a representative of the Department would call DCM Richard Baltimore (Hungary) to discuss the Popovic case in an effort to obtain the additional information necessary to make a reasoned assessment of the State Department's request. Subsequently, Molly Warlow (OIA), spoke with DCM Baltimore and we are arranging to have Department personnel interview Popovic and his family this week. In addition, Department personnel will also discuss the Popovic case

with the Tribunal prosecutor tomorrow.

Specifically, State is pressing Justice (1) to parole Popovic, his wife and son into the United States on the basis of "public interest;" and (2) to put Popovic in the witness protection program.

The latter request is a bit more straightforward. Popovic does not qualify for the program since he does not meet the requirement of being a witness or potential witness in a U.S. proceeding. This same limitation has in the past required us to decline requests from foreign countries for us to relocate and protect witnesses who testifying in their trials. An argument could be made that we might legally extend the program to Popovic based on (1) our overall obligation to assist the Tribunal under the Security Council's resolution regarding the Tribunal and (2) the notion that "drawdown" funding to assist the Tribunal would cover expenditure of program funds not otherwise available for such a witness. These arguments are, however, tenuous and the costs of such a relocation would be enormous. As far as we know, Popovic speaks no English which would make his transition here particularly difficult. Furthermore, we have no information regarding his physical or mental health and what special needs he and his family might have in this regard.

As to the parole issue, it is our understanding that Popovic could be given an INS parole, based on a public interest determination. (He would need to be parolled since it is doubtful he would qualify for admission.) State originally approached INS for the parole at a relatively low level. INS has been advised to await further instructions from the Department on this matter.

Serious concerns arise with respect to granting the parole. First, to date background information on Popovic is limited. He asserts he engaged in beatings of prisoners, but no murders. No witnesses as yet implicate him in murders. However, there is certainly a possibility that he was more culpably involved than he now admits. If he engaged in atrocities, a parole probably would not be proper and could cause us significant embarrassment. Even the role he has admitted to, being a guard at a detention facility at which mass executions may have been committed and himself beating prisoners, is not insignificant.

Second, we cannot give any ironclad assurance of our ability to return him to the Tribunal upon its request. In addition to being called as a witness, Popovic could be charged and his surrender sought as a defendant. While our ability to remove Popovic (assuming we can find him when he is needed) is eased by a parole, which makes him excludable, we cannot necessarily guarantee either the results or speed of an exclusion hearing. (Moreover, parolees are excludable to countries, not to

Tribunals.) Thus, having once brought Popovic here, we could face embarrassment by not being able to return him immediately to appear as a witness, or worse, to return him as a defendant.

The latter scenario is all the more troubling since we presently have no clear authority akin to extradition to arrest and surrender offenders to the Tribunal. (We are seeking such legislation.) If Popovic is charged and we cannot surrender him, then we may well face an international obligation to try him here. While the State Department dismisses these factors and the additional concern Popovic further complicating matters by seeking asylum, our experience has shown the mischief that can be worked in immigration proceedings generally, and our inability to assure prompt and predictable results in even in exclusions.

In sum, the "relocation" scenario to which State has so committed itself dependent on two significant DOJ actions, as to which we were not consulted in the first instance. Unfortunately we have no source of information about Popovic, his background, the depth of the Deputy Prosecutor's views, possible alternative locations for his relocation, the nature and gravity of the threat against him and so on, other than through State, which is adamant about his relocation here and virtually insisting that a decision be made immediately. The information provided by State is attached. The Department should be given an opportunity to make an independent judgement based on a complete threat assessment as is the usual course through the Office of Enforcement Operations. In the meantime, the State Department should explore the possibility of alternative relocation areas in Europe.

Of course, there will be a strong desire within the U.S. Government to be seen as assisting the Tribunal to protect a witness who may be able to provide important testimony implicating Serbs higher up in the chain of command, and we do not denigrate the potential utility of Popovic's testimony. However, if a decision is made to grant a parole, State must be informed that in doing so we cannot assure that securing his later presence before the Tribunal, either as a witness or defendant, will be unproblematic or, indeed, will occur at all.

Attachments

AUG 02'94

12:37 No.002 P.02

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final

TO: DOJ - Mark Richard
FROM: L - Michael J. Matheson
SUBJECT: Possible Parole for War Crimes Witness

Graham Blewitt, Deputy Prosecutor of the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, has asked that the United States temporarily relocate Pero Popovic, his wife, and his son. Mr. Popovic has agreed to provide information to the Prosecutor's Office and to testify before the Tribunal if requested to do so. He and his family are now in the care of a U.S. Embassy in Europe, which reports that he is in "grave danger" and urgently asks that he be sent to the United States. We believe that it is appropriate to grant him public interest parole at least until he finishes providing information to the Tribunal.

Background

Mr. Popovic was referred to the Prosecutor's Office by a U.S. Embassy, which had been approached by a New York Times reporter. The Prosecutor's Office interviewed him for two days, then spent several weeks evaluating his information in the light of other information available to it. On Thursday, July 28, the Deputy Prosecutor told our Embassy that he believed Mr. Popovic should be temporarily relocated until he could testify. The next day, we learned that he would present himself at a U.S. Embassy (at the urging of the reporter and, perhaps, personnel of the Prosecutor's Office). We contacted INS to learn what steps to take next. On August 1, Mr. Popovic presented himself to a U.S. Embassy, where he is now under the care of Embassy personnel. That day, his story was published on page 1 of the New York Times (including photograph) and the International Herald Tribune. The story noted that the Tribunal had requested that Mr. Popovic be moved to the United States.

For several months before this situation arose we had urged the Tribunal to develop arrangements for witness protection with the Netherland and other states, including the United States. We will use this instance to impress upon the Prosecutor the urgency of the matter. We believe that adequate arrangements can be developed in Europe, but only with time. Until they are in place, however, we do not believe that it would be advisable to locate Mr. Popovic outside the United States.

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Popovic's Information

Mr. Popovic, a Bosnian Serb, says that he was a guard in a Serb-run detention facility at Susica. Two experienced investigators from the Prosecutor's office found him to be credible after two days of interviews checked against information available to the Tribunal. His information corroborates information available to the Tribunal, to the U.S. Government, and in mass media. It is valuable because it links regional political and military leaders to the operation of a detention facility at which numerous (perhaps hundreds) of Muslim noncombatants were killed. It would be the Tribunal's first testimony from a Bosnian Serb with knowledge of the military and political hierarchy in that region. Other available information comes from Muslim victims, who can only surmise about command and control relationships. The Deputy Prosecutor has on several occasions emphasized the value of this information.

The United States as Destination

The Deputy Prosecutor specifically requested relocation in the United States. The U.S. Embassy now hosting Mr. Popovic concurs.

The U.S. Embassy emphasized that Mr. Popovic "could not be more vulnerable" as a result of the publicity surrounding his story. We know of no direct threats to Mr. Popovic yet. His accusations became public only on Monday, however, and it does not seem prudent to wait for threats to mature. Both the New York Times reporter and Mr. Popovic have expressed serious concern for his safety in Europe. (The reporter delayed publication for weeks until Popovic could reach safety.) We cannot know whether the publicity associated with his revelations makes him more or less likely to be targeted; it is nevertheless indisputable that the publicity magnifies the damage that will be done if he is harmed.

The likelihood of danger is great in Europe, where casual travel by loosely organized groups is possible. Four western European states have arrested Bosnian Serbs for atrocities, refugees regularly report seeing alleged perpetrators in Western Europe, and the Bosnian Government reports "hundreds" more Serbs travelling on false papers. There have been reports of witness intimidation. Threats in the United States would require more organization than we have seen thus far.

We do not believe that it a location outside the United States is likely now. The Dutch Government, which will be responsible for witness protection, accepted one witness several months ago under circumstances similar to Mr.

- 3 -

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Popovic's. The Dutch has expressed extreme unhappiness with the unwillingness of other governments to protect that witness. Because of the costs and difficulties of hiding the one witness they now have, the Deputy Prosecutor believes that they would be unlikely to accept another until their arrangements are completed.

As the Dutch experience of several months ago revealed, other states have shown little interest in supporting the Tribunal with cooperation on matters such as this (including locating witnesses, making them available for interviews, and arranging for the transfer of persons). We have no reason to believe that any state will be willing to take charge of a person already under the care of the United States. Because it is publicly known that the Tribunal has asked the United States to handle this case, we would be blamed for any problems that arise.

Public Interest Parole

Granting Mr. Popovic parole furthers the public interest of the United States. The Tribunal is integral to U.S. policy in the former Yugoslavia. If we do not help promptly, the Tribunal and other states will question our support for the Tribunal just as the Tribunal is starting investigations (for which witness protection will be important) and seeking support with other states (in which our influence and unambiguous leadership could be instrumental).

If the first Bosnian Serb to come forward is publicly endangered, intimidated, or harmed, the Tribunal will lose a great deal of credibility, for which the U.S. Government has worked for almost two years to establish. The United States has admitted persons as refugees solely because they provided information to foreign or international investigations of atrocities. (As I explain below, we do not believe that that is appropriate in this case.)

The U.S. Government believes that the Tribunal is integral to long-term prospects for peace in the former Yugoslavia. It will identify individuals responsible for atrocities, reducing the identification of violence with particular groups; it will also remove some of those individuals, who would otherwise be vulnerable to reprisals or responsible for fomenting further hatred. With the Justice Department's help, the U.S. Government will contribute about \$12 million this year to the Tribunal, including the services of more than 20 prosecutors, investigators, and regional experts. Failure to help in this high-profile case would jeopardize its prospects.

- 4 -

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Popovic and Atrocities

We would not recommend public interest parole for Mr. Popovic if there were information linking him to atrocities likely to result in his indictment by the Tribunal. He has admitted in the New York Times to beating prisoners but denies any role in other crimes, including killings and rapes. Neither the Tribunal nor the U.S. Government has any information other than his own statements linking him to any atrocities. The Tribunal reported that it has "considerable" information on the detention facility in question. The Times also interviewed a number of Susica survivors, including asking them about Mr. Popovic, and did not link him to atrocities. The U.S. Government has few (under ten) reports on the Susica facility. We have, however, extensive analyses of events at the Batkovic camp, to which prisoners at Susica were moved. These reports identify perpetrators from several camps, including Susica. Those familiar with information available to the U.S. Government believe that Popovic likely would have been identified in at least one report if he had been regularly or systematically involved in atrocities.

We cannot now learn as much as we would like to know before making a decision. The Prosecutor will develop a great deal information about Susica over the next several months, making whatever information we could obtain seem incomplete. We do not recommend Mr. Popovic for either refugee status or humanitarian parole (although the latter may be necessary if danger to his safety is the basis for admitting him to the United States), because it is possible that he will be incriminated by subsequent information. We can reduce any embarrassment from accepting him if we make it clear that his parole is contingent upon his not have committed crimes other than those described in the Times story.

Tribunal Indictments of Popovic

I understand that your office has raised questions concerning our ability to transfer Mr. Popovic to the Tribunal, if it indicts him and orders his transfer. The Deputy Prosecutor does not intend to seek indictments based on information now available. We would be willing to seek a commitment from the Prosecutor's Office not to seek the indictment or transfer of Mr. Popovic on the basis of information now known. Under the Tribunal's Statute and rules, however, the Prosecutor has sole discretion to decide which indictments to bring.

We would be happy to specify conditions to his parole if you believe that it would facilitate his transfer. (We have considered conditions: continued cooperation with the Tribunal, to the satisfaction of the Prosecutor and no information of having committed or otherwise participated in atrocities beyond that in the New York Times story.)

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We believe that the imminent harm to the Tribunal in this case -- both in terms of our leadership ability and the Tribunal credibility -- is greater than the speculative risks arising from information we do not know.

Arrangements for Popovic

If Mr. Popovic is granted parole, the Department of State will pay for his air travel to the United States, as part of our contribution to the Tribunal as directed by the President on May 16.

It would be desirable to provide him with services like those available through the witness protection program. We do not know all the services would be necessary but believe that it will be advisable to provide assistance in meeting and relocating him, as well as safety precautions. Mr. Popovic probably would not be welcome in emigre communities; does not speak English; and has work experience only as a soldier and manager of a lumber facility.

We hope that appropriate services could be made available by the Department of Justice pursuant to the Presidential Determination of May 16, 1994 directing U.S. agencies to provide goods and services to the Tribunal. The Department of State's refugee facilities are not available to persons paroled into the United States. Other agencies have some expertise in this area but might be inappropriate in the context of the Tribunal.

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

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NEW YORK, MONDAY,

Ex-Guard for Serbs Tells Of Grisly 'Cleansing' Camp

By ROGER COHEN

Special to The New York Times

VLASENICA, Bosnia and Herzegovina — There were, according to the 1991 Yugoslav census, 18,699 Muslims living in and around this eastern Bosnian mining town. Dead now, or dispersed, they have all gone.

Their fate was determined by a Serbian concentration camp that lay concealed in a pine-clad valley

about a mile from the city center. A former military depot surrounded by barbed wire, it is called Susica.

Although the camp is closed, the road to it is still barred and guarded, and a sign at the entrance to Vlasenica says, "Any loitering by foreigners is forbidden." The reason is simple: Susica hides terrible secrets about the Serbian slaughter and eviction of Muslims in Bosnia.

But now a Bosnian Serb, who was a guard at the camp and eventually fled Vlasenica, has provided for the first time an insider's detailed account of the process of eviction and slaughter that "cleansed" Vlasenica of its Muslims.

The guard, Pero Popovic, 36, was interviewed three times by The New York Times and clearly recognized snapshots of former Muslim prisoners of Susica. Later, he was interrogated by investigators preparing for Yugoslav war-crimes trials in The Hague. Convinced of his credibility, they have recommended that he be granted political asylum in the United States.

In addition, Mr. Popovic's account was corroborated by the convergent recollections of dozens of Susica survivors who now live as refugees and who provided the photos Mr. Popovic later viewed.

Mr. Popovic estimated that on the basis of individual and mass executions he personally witnessed, close to 3,000 Muslims from around Vlasenica (pro-

Continued on Page A8, Column 1

Secrets of Susica

How Muslims Died in Bosnia

First of two articles.



Roger Cohen/The New York Times

Pero Popovic, the guard who described the killings at Susica.



Pentagon Chief Visits Rwanda

Defense Secretary William J. Perry, left, and Sadako Ogata, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, yesterday in the

Whitewater Talks Not Unethical, A

By STEPHEN LABAREE
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 31 — A non-partisan Federal ethics agency concluded today that Treasury officials violated no ethics regulations when they briefed White House officials about an investigation into a savings and loan with ties to President Clinton and his wife. But the agency found the meetings troubling and said that some senior officials did not fully

Clinton had business with an Oz savings company. The White House

When Worlds Collide: A Threat
To the Earth Is ...

Ex-Guard for Serbs Tells of 'Cleansing' Of Bosnian Muslims

Continued From Page A1

since August 1992, when, four months after the war began, the Omarska and Keraterm camps near Prijedor and Banja Luka were uncovered. Yet doubts have remained over the extent of mass executions of Muslims — particularly in the less-accessible eastern part of Bosnia — over the degree of central decision-making in the operation and over the reliability of often anonymous and exclusively Muslim witnesses.

Serbs have insisted that the camps were detention centers for prisoners of war — that is, combatants rather than civilians — and that the term "death camp" is entirely misplaced. But the accounts of camp survivors and Mr. Popovic — who is prepared to testify at war-crimes trials — tell a different story and establish these points:

¶The intimidation and confinement of Vlasenica's Muslim civilians were instigated by a unit of the Yugoslav Army, based in the northern Serbian town of Novi Sad. Moreover, ultimate command of the Susica camp rested throughout with Maj. Mile Jacimovic, an officer in the Yugoslav Army who is now stationed in the town of Pljevlja in the Sandzak area of the rump Yugoslav state, Mr. Popovic said. The role suggests the degree to which the "ethnic cleansing" of Bosnia's Muslims was coordinated by the Yugoslav Army and the Serbian authorities in Belgrade, contradicting Belgrade's repeated claims that the Bosnian war has been an affair solely of the Bosnian Serbs.

¶From the time Susica opened on June 2, 1992, until it closed four months later, groups of Muslims were executed every night at the command of Dragan Nikolic, a man

tally evicted by Muslims from many towns in central Bosnia, including Zenica.

Asked about events in eastern Bosnia and Vlasenica, Budimir Kosiutic, the head of a war crimes commission established by the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav Government, argued that Serbs had been imprisoned in many camps by the Muslims. He insisted that Muslims "initiated whatever happened in Vlasenica by provoking and attacking the Serbs in the first three months of 1992 in several villages in eastern Bosnia."

It is certain that the rise of the Muslim-nationalist Party for Democratic Action of the Bosnian President, Alija Izetbegovic, gave Serbs throughout Bosnia cause for concern over their future. But Western diplomats have found little evidence of attacks on Serbs before the war began.

Neither Major Jacimovic, identified by Mr. Popovic as the overall commander of Susica and of the "cleansing" of Vlasenica, nor Mr. Nikolic, whom survivors of the camp and Mr. Popovic identified as the man with day-to-day control of the camp, could be reached. The Bosnian Serbs severely restrict the movement of journalists, and do not hesitate to arrest them when they stray from officially permitted themes or itineraries.

Vlasenica today still bears the scars of this terror. Its mosque is gone, replaced by a dismal little square, and its bullet-scarred Muslim homes are empty or occupied by Serbian refugees from Government-held territory.

"The Muslim families of Vlasenica ran away of their own accord when the Bosnian war broke out," Mikajlo Bajagic, the Serbian president of the town council, said in an interview. "But, for a period of time, there were some who were imprisoned, there were some who were confined."

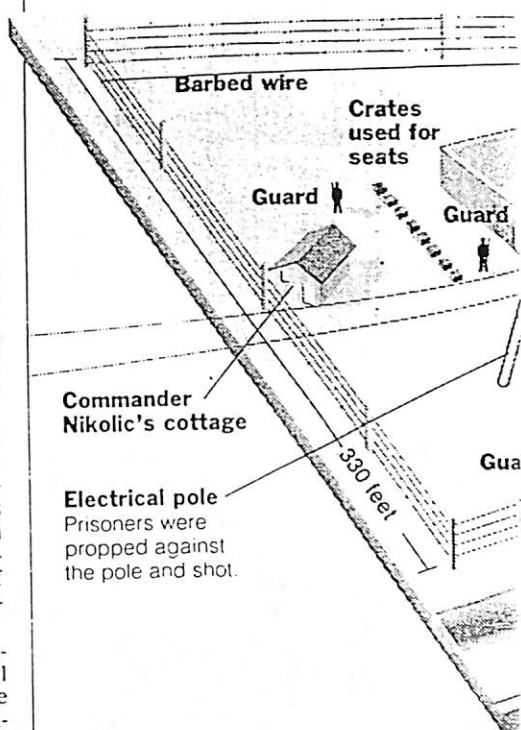
What, Mr. Bajagic was asked, happened to these Muslims who were imprisoned or confined? "They were exchanged," he said, "against Serbian prisoners." Then, as he seemed to sense that he had said too much and mild panic spread across his face, he added:

"But what I say may not be completely accurate. It is probably not accurate at all. I did not have this job at the start of the war. I really have no idea what was going on."

Two Sons

THE SITE

Susica: A Depot Bec



Source: Pero Popovic, guard at the Susica camp



Photographs by Roger Cohen/The New York Times

Amir Berbic

Former prisoner of Serbs

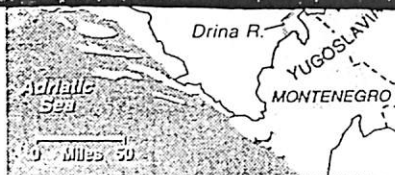
"I was beaten... sometimes three or four times a day, and slashed with knives."



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The New York Times

Vlasenica, a mining town, became the graveyard of 3,000 Muslims.

who now works for the Bosnian Serb secret police and was in charge of the day-to-day running of the camp, Mr. Popovic and Muslim survivors said. Nearly all those executed were civilians taken from their homes. On at least one occasion, a group of more than 100 people was executed.

Muslim men, women and children in Vlasenica were rounded up with equal brutality and subjected to the same abject conditions in Susica. Susica was generally a transit camp for women and children, but some were executed.

Many Muslim men from Vlasenica who were not executed were eventually transferred to the Batkovic camp near Bijeljina, about 60 miles to the north. At Batkovic, the Serbs presented these civilians to the Red Cross authorities as "prisoners of war" rather than what they were, arbitrarily arrested civilians.

Mr. Popovic, who was a sergeant in the Yugoslav Army in the late 1970's and joined the Bosnia Serb forces when the Bosnian war broke out, explained his decision to talk as an attempt to assuage his conscience.

He admitted having beaten Muslim prisoners, but says he never killed any. Increasingly troubled after Susica closed, he said he deserted the Bosnian Serb army and fled Vlasenica on Jan. 1, 1993, abandoning a timber business and his home there.

"The worst part of it was knowing the prisoners," he said, tugging nervously at his beard. "I had grown up with these Muslims, as had all the guards. And yet we beat them with pieces of timber and iron rods. How could anyone imagine such things before they started?"

"There is no question that the orders came from the highest level," said Mr. Popovic, who is now out of the former Yugoslavia. "Our army had a strict chain of command from the outset, and Major Jacimovic received orders from above."

Beatings and executions of civilians have not only been the work of Serbs in Bosnia. Both Croats and Muslims have also operated camps during the Bosnian war, and the Muslims' Tarcin camp near Sarajevo is a prison where the international authorities believe that Serbs have been widely abused.

Serbian civilians have been bru-

dictory. accurate. I did not have this job at the start of the war. I really have no idea what was going on."

Two Sons

A Mother Can Get No Information

It was May 31, 1992, when three Serbs drove up in a Volkswagen Golf to the Vlasenica home of Hiba Mehmedovic, a 50-year-old widow. She knew one of them, whom she identified in an interview as Dragan Basta, but the others were unknown to her. All the men had automatic weapons.

The Serbs came into her house and arrested her two sons, Kemal Mehmedovic, a 27-year-old driver, and Nedžad Mehmedovic, a 25-year-old mechanic.

"Why are you taking my boys?" Mrs. Mehmedovic asked. The men replied that the arrests amounted to no more than an administrative procedure and that her sons would return shortly after reports had been filed.

Mrs. Mehmedovic never saw her sons again.

That day, she tried to get information from the police, the Mayor and a prominent Serbian doctor in Vlasenica. To no avail. Returning in tears to her home that night she met her neighbor, a Serb named Obrad Kovacevic. As Mrs. Mehmedovic recalled it, the following conversation ensued:

"What happened?" Mr. Kovacevic asked.

"They took my boys."

"Oh, don't worry, they'll just beat them a bit."

"What?" Mrs. Mehmedovic exclaimed.

"And by the way," said her neighbor, "why don't you come over for a coffee? My wife is in Belgrade."

Such humiliation from Serbs had become routine since the Bosnian war broke out. It was a time, according to several accounts of survivors, when neighbors suddenly became strangers, when old friends became enemies and when Serbs were abruptly endowed with the power to demean and terrorize the Muslims with whom they had lived.

After her boys' arrest, Mrs. Mehmedovic said, she survived seven more weeks in Vlasenica, before being forced onto a bus on July 18 and taken to a village near the Muslim-held town of Kladanj, about 20 miles to the west.

For the last two years she has lived with other Vlasenica refugees in the classroom of a kindergarten in Kladanj, obliged to use toilets built for 4-year-olds and to sleep on a thin mat-



Hiba Mehmedovic

Widow whose two sons were seized

"Like any mother, I have to believe my boys are alive."



Harudin Meric

Released, but his brother remained

"I have never heard anything about my brother again."



Fikra Atalov

Vlasenica refugee

"Once the Novi Sad Corps came, there was no way out."

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SITE
Susica: A Depot Becomes a Death Camp

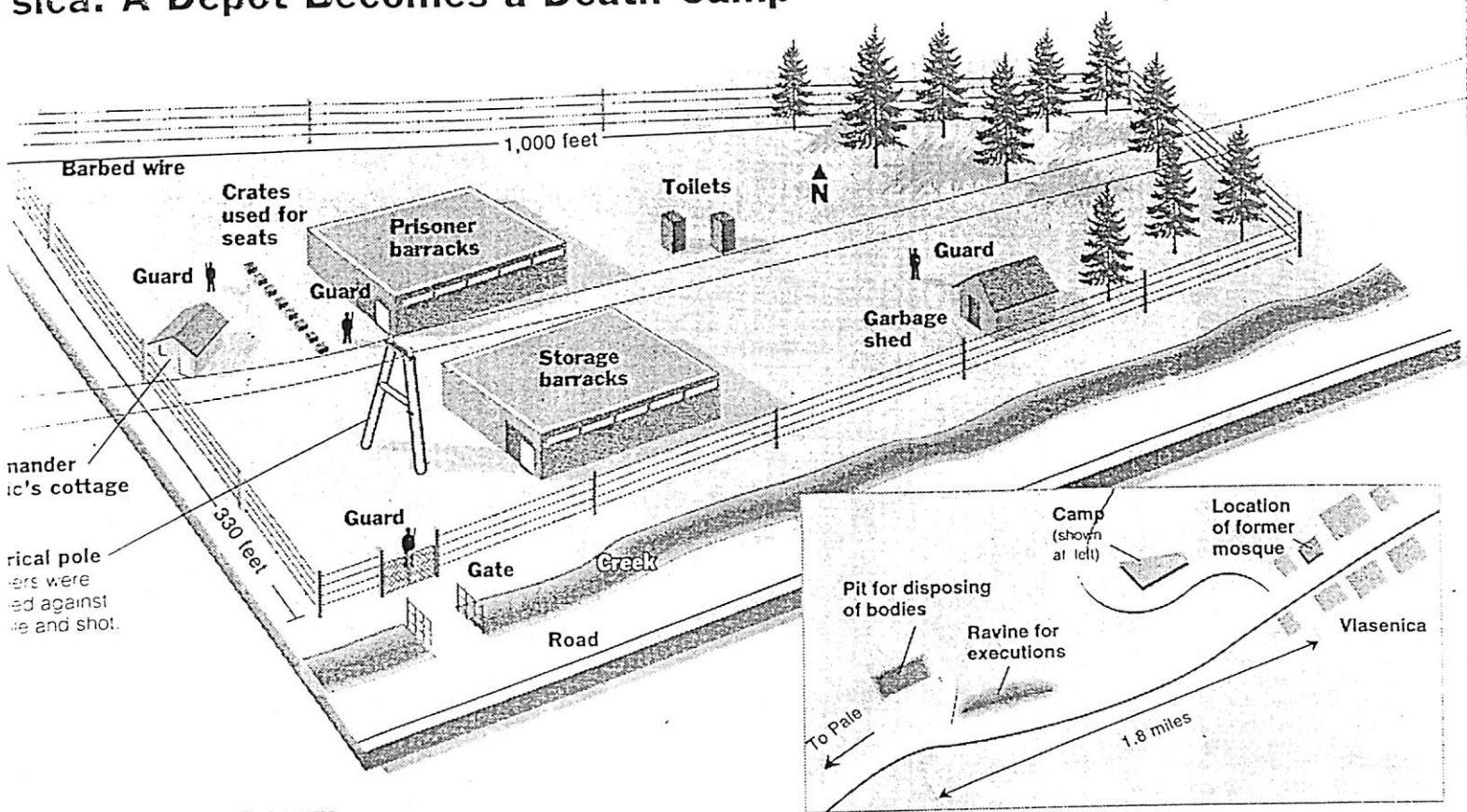


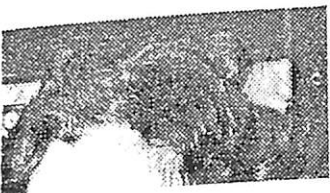
Illustration by Pero Popovic, guard at the Susica camp

Ty Ahmad-Taylor and Newman Huh/The New York Times



Photograph by Roger Cohen/The New York Times

Berbic
prisoner of Serbs
beaten... sometimes three
times a day, and slashed
nerves."



stress on the floor beneath which she keeps two faded black-and-white photographs of her sons.
"Like any mother," she said, tears abruptly filling her eyes, "I have to believe my boys are alive."
Mr. Popovic, the Serb who was one of the 15 guards at Susica camp, said Mrs. Mehmedovic hopes in vain. "The two Mehmedovic boys were executed in June 1992, after being taken to the Susica camp," he said.

**One Town
Nationalism,
Then Slaughter**

The story of the Mehmedovic family typifies the horror that engulfed Vlasenica. Before the war, the town was like many others in Bosnia in its ethnic make-up. The town and surrounding area, including outlying villages, had 30,498 inhabitants, about 60 percent of whom were Muslim.
The town's economy was based on nearby bauxite mines and a substantial timber business. Relations between Serbs and Muslims gave little hint, on the surface, of the potential

Muslims from Vlasenica recalled Serbs from outlying villages coming into the town, getting drunk, firing shots in the air and warning the Muslims that they would have to leave. But some joint Muslim-Serbian police patrols continued at least until April 10.
"My own decision to leave only came when I saw a military vehicle stop in front of a Serb's home on April 10, and deliver some automatic weapons," Mr. Memisevic said. "The message was clear."

Mr. Memisevic was one of the lucky few with the foresight to get away. On April 21, according to Mr. Popovic and several Muslim refugees, soldiers from the Novi Sad Corps of the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav Army arrived and surrounded Vlasenica. Tanks were installed in key positions. It became impossible for Muslims to leave.
"Once the Novi Sad Corps came, there was no way out," said Fikra Atalov, another Vlasenica refugee living on the floor in the Kladanj kindergarten. "One had to have a special permission, and the bus station was patrolled by the Serbs."
The Yugoslav Army soldiers pulled out of Vlasenica and the rest of Bos-

nia of about 200 Muslim men being rounded up in the surrounding Vlasenica streets and led down to the Susica camp. There, he said, he was searched, and all his documents were taken. Then he was pushed into the hangar.
"The place was full of other civilians," he said. "Some were wounded, some very dirty. There was a concrete floor, and virtually nowhere to sit."
Conditions, according to more than 20 convergent accounts, were appalling. At least 600 people — men, women and children — were generally inside the hangar, which was about 40 yards long and 20 wide. They were not allowed to wash; in the mid-summer heat, the smell was sometimes overwhelming.
Twice a day, prisoners were allowed to file out of the hangar to get a bowl of thin soup and use a toilet. No talking was permitted at any time, nor were any blankets to cushion the concrete floor. Men were regularly stripped to the waist and beaten.
One of the men beaten with metal rods by Serbian guards was Amir Berbic, a locksmith who is now a refugee in Tuzla. He, too, was arrested and taken to Susica camp on June



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ages, had 30,498 inhabitants, about 60 percent of whom were Muslim.

The town's economy was based on nearby bauxite mines and a substantial timber business. Relations between Serbs and Muslims gave little hint, on the surface, of the potential for the kind of violence that took place. But there were a few worrying signs.

Ibro Memisevic, a former Caterpillar representative in Vlasenica who fled the town on April 11, 1992, and now lives in Tuzla, recalled that after the Croatian war broke out in 1991, Yugoslav Army maneuvers were held in the nearby Bosnian town of Han Pijesak.

"But," he said, "only the Serbs of Vlasenica were invited to take part, while Muslims were excluded. The atmosphere was being prepared." At this time, both Bosnian Serbs and Muslims were still citizens of the former Yugoslavia, so it was abnormal that only the ethnic Serbs were called up for the Yugoslav Army.

Serbs, for their part, appear to have been worried by the sharp rise in the Muslim population of the Vlasenica area — 22 percent in the 1981-91 decade — and by their increasing domination of local politics through Mr. Izetbegovic's Muslim-nationalist party.

"In the 1990-92 period, nothing proposed by Serbs could pass in the town council," said Mr. Bajagic, the current council president.

Mr. Popovic recalled groups of Muslims throwing stones at Serbs.

"Economic stagnation fueled the rise of the nationalist parties," the former Susica guard said. "So many people of 25 had never had a job. The Muslim nationalists and the Serbs offered these people 100 marks and could do what they liked with them. You could feel the war coming."

After the European Community recognized the independence of Croatia and Slovenia from Yugoslavia in early 1992, Vlasenica, like other Bosnian towns, became rapidly polarized over the issue of the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Serbs, almost one third of the pre-war Bosnian population, boycotted a referendum on independence on Feb. 29, 1992, while Bosnia's Muslims and Croats voted in favor. Serbs then proposed the division of the country into three ethnic cantons, but this was rejected by Mr. Izetbegovic.

Ignoring all the danger signals, and the precedent of the Croatian war, the United States and the European Community recognized Bosnian independence in early April. Predictably, the Serbs went to war.

While Serbian shells started to fall on Sarajevo from April 6, the Serbian assault in Vlasenica was initially less blunt.

Atalov, another Vlasenica refugee living on the floor in the Kladanj kindergarten. "One had to have a special permission, and the bus station was patrolled by the Serbs."

The Yugoslav Army soldiers pulled out of Vlasenica and the rest of Bosnia in early May, leaving the bulk of their weapons and transferring some 80,000 troops to the local Serbs.

Mr. Popovic, who joined the Bosnian Serb army at the beginning of April, said there was a steady influx of "gangsters and criminals from Serbia, and others who saw a chance to make money."

"With a mass of unemployed people under 25, you can do what you like," Mr. Popovic added. "These people were longing for action and a chance to loot Muslims."

While conditions for Muslims in Vlasenica were terrible throughout May 1992 — the refugees said beatings, random arrests and reprisal killings were commonplace — their systematic eviction and slaughter did not start until the beginning of June.

First, a camp for this purpose had to be prepared, and in a former military depot called Susica the Serbs found the ideal spot. Mr. Popovic said that at the beginning of May he was told by his commander, Capt. Boban Kukic, to prepare to work in a prison camp.

During May, Mr. Popovic said, a large hangar was emptied and the camp surrounded with thick coils of barbed wire. "Fifteen of us were chosen as guards," he said. "We were all over 30; they wanted people with some experience. The alternative was to be shot, or sent to the front line."

Tugging his beard, he added, "I still did not believe there would be massacres of civilians."

The Camp Beating and Killing Amid the Squalor

Zijad Zemic was one of the first men to enter Susica as a prisoner on June 2, 1992. He stayed in the camp until July 1. Now 19, he speaks with a stutter and fear haunts his pale eyes. He is a refugee in Tuzla.

"Two armed Serbs — I only know their first names, Milan and Miso — came to my house on June 2, 1992," he said. "They told me to put my arms behind my head and come with them. It was raining, and I wanted to get a coat, but I was not allowed to."

Mr. Zemic was thrust into a group

concrete floor. Men were regularly stripped to the waist and beaten."

One of the men beaten with metal rods by Serbian guards was Amir Berbic, a locksmith who is now a refugee in Tuzla. He, too, was arrested and taken to Susica camp on June 2, where he remained for a month before being taken to Batkovic camp near Bijeljina and ultimately exchanged for Serbian prisoners of war. His left ear is still deformed from beatings, and his arms and legs are scarred.

"I was beaten inside and outside the hangar, sometimes three or four times a day, and slashed with knives," Mr. Berbic said. "They were shouting about how all the Muslims would disappear and calling us 'Balija' and forcing us to sing Serbian songs." "Balija" is a racial insult for Muslims.

Sometimes prisoners were beaten to death. One such victim was Durmo Handzic, a Muslim who used to work in the telephone company in Vlasenica. Several witnesses said he was killed inside the hangar on or about June 15, 1992. Another older man, Asim Zildic, was beaten to death shortly afterward, Mr. Berbic said.

"It's true that Durmo Handzic was beaten to death," said Mr. Popovic, the guard. "It was believed that he had weapons. Another man beaten to death was Redzo Hatunic."

Mr. Popovic described broadly how the selection process at the camp worked: Men suspected of having some political influence or trafficking in arms were not taken for exchange and were generally executed; other men who seemed more innocuous were often transported to Batkovic camp for eventual exchange. Women and children were taken up to the front line a few miles to the west and forced to walk to Kladanj.

But in many cases, the process seems to have been very random. Harudin Meric, for instance, was arrested with his wife and three children and taken to Susica on June 2. Two days later, his wife and children were allowed to go to Kladanj. He was later taken to Batkovic camp and exchanged, and now lives as a refugee in Tuzla.

But his older brother, Muharem, a 44-year-old carpenter, remained in Susica camp.

"I have never heard anything about my brother again, although I wrote repeated letters," Mr. Meric said.

Mr. Popovic said Muharem Meric had been executed.

NEXT: The pace of killing accelerates.