

Aleksovski Trial: The 'Pedagogue Warden'

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So goes the prosecutor's version. The defense of Zlatko Aleksovski, who is accused of having been the commander of the Kaonik camp at the time of the alleged crimes, says none of the above is true.

The defense has been attempting to prove that Kaonik was not a camp but a prison; that Aleksovski was not a camp commander but a prison warden; and that the detained Bosniak men found themselves in it "for their own good," i.e. to "be protected from fighting and shelling."

This is the reason they were detained in a hangar, "a solid construction" that could withstand the shelling from Bosnian army positions. As for the trenches, they were an absolute necessity at the time, due to Bosnian army attacks; local Croat civilians were also ordered to dig them, not only the "protected prisoners" of Kaonik.

True, some detainees never came back from trench-digging expeditions, the defense's argument goes, but not because they were killed (as the prosecution claims) but for the simple reason that they fled from their "protectors." None of the defense witnesses naturally knows anything about abuses, beatings, and killings of the detainees, or about their use as human shields.

All six witnesses summoned by the defense last week were active in the Kaonik camp/prison at the time covered by the indictment: be it as military policemen, reservist-guards, cooks, or secretaries. All of them testified that the accused did everything within his power to "ensure normal conditions in the prison."

Moreover, all of them claimed that his authority, as the prison warden, was not great. According to the defense, the guards were subordinated to military police and not to the "civilian warden," so Aleksovski could not have held them accountable for possible mistreatment of prisoners. As a civilian, he also could not prevent the soldiers from entering the prison and interrogating and beating the inmates.

In addition, the warden had no role in taking the prisoners to dig trenches: that was under the jurisdiction of the prison chief of security.

All this seemed pretty odd to Presiding Judge Almiro Simoes Rodrigues, so he was curious to find out how it was possible that a district military prison, located in a military object (former JNA barracks), with the military police of the HVO present, could have a civilian warden.

It was possible, replied witness Blazenka Vujica, who, as a member of the HVO military police, worked as a secretary to the prison warden Aleksovski. She explained that, because of his professional experience (before the war, he was a social worker at the Zenica penitentiary), Aleksovski was appointed warden in order to "teach" the inexperienced HVO military policemen "how to run a prison." Therefore, his function in the prison/camp was more a pedagogical than a command one.

The defense's presentation of evidence is expected to last until the first half of August.

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