

## **Krajisnik Witness' Harrowing Testimony**

**Author:** [Merdijana Sadović](#)

Young witness describes traumatic events that led to the deaths of his father and uncle in Serb massacre.

The trial of former Bosnian Serb politician Momcilo Krajisnik has continued with the emotional testimony of a young man who narrowly avoided getting caught up in one of the biggest massacres listed in the indictment.

Elvedin Pasic told the court this week how the northern Bosnian village where he lived was razed to the ground by Serb artillery, and described how he was later captured by Serb soldiers while trying to flee the area with a group of 200 Muslim and Croat fighters.

The men with him – including his father – were apparently later executed.

The massacre is one of a series of atrocities listed in the indictment against Krajisnik, who is accused of being a driving force behind a “joint criminal enterprise” to expel Bosnian Muslims and Croats from northwest Bosnia.

With his highlighted hair, fashionable glasses and goatee beard, 26-year-old Elvedin – who now lives in the United States – looked out of place in an international criminal court. But he has already given evidence in the trial of former Bosnian Serb leader Radoslav Brdjanin, who was recently sentenced to 32 years in prison for crimes associated with ethnic cleansing.

When the Bosnian war erupted in the spring of 1992, the 14-year-old Elvedin lived with his family in the prosperous Muslim village of Hrvacani in the Kotor Varos municipality. The conflict to him seemed like a very distant affair, unlikely to disrupt his life or the lives of his family. But during a school break in May 1992, he and his friends saw a column of military vehicles full of soldiers passing through the village, and sensed that something was wrong.

“We asked our teachers what was going on, and they told us it was just a military exercise. But military exercises I’d seen before were fun, more like a game. This time, it was totally different,” Elvedin told the court.

On June 12, two tanks and some 30 to 50 Serb soldiers positioned themselves on a hill above Hrvacani. And that night, without any warning, the shelling began. By dawn the whole village had been destroyed.

Elvedin and his family survived, but knew they had to leave the area before the Serb infantry arrived.

They escaped and Elvedin’s father and older brother signed up to join the Bosnian Muslim forces fighting the Serbs, while Elvedin and his mother spent several months travelling from one village to another, seeking shelter and food.

In early November 1992 the last local pocket of Muslim-Croat resistance, the village of Vecici, looked set to fall to the Serbs. And Elvedin’s family decided to try to escape to territory held by the Bosnian army in the centre of the country.

Elvedin's mother left in a civilian convoy but his father feared that Elvedin, who was not far off fighting age, might be picked out of a column of refugees by Serb soldiers. So he took the boy with him and they joined his uncle and 500 other fighters who were hoping to find a safer route through the woods.

But the group was soon ambushed by Serb forces. In the chaos that ensued it split in two and Elvedin and his father were left with some 200 fighters and a dozen civilians, including five boys his age. Still under fire, they made their way down a hill towards a river before running into a minefield.

"The leader of our group stepped on a mine and had both his legs blown off," Elvedin told the court, his voice shaking.

He remembers it was raining that night and his huge coat was soaked with water. He could hardly walk, but his father kept urging him to hurry up. Finally, Elvedin's group ran into a second ambush. This time they had no choice but to surrender.

"We were forced to lie in the mud, face down, for two hours. Serb soldiers were randomly picking up people and beating them. My father was lying next to me, and they beat him too," Elvedin said.

Trucks arrived, and the women and boys from the group were ordered to stand up and walk towards them.

"I didn't want to go, but my uncle insisted," Elvedin told the court. "'That's the only way you'll survive,' he said. 'And don't turn back, or they'll shoot you'."

The terrified boy took his advice. He never saw his father or uncle again.

The women and young boys were taken to a school in the Serb village of Grabovci, where they were supposed to spend the night before joining a convoy of Muslim and Croat refugees leaving for central Bosnia the next day. That night Elvedin saw trucks arriving, full of men from his father's group. They were taken to a classroom upstairs, but he was too afraid to check whether his father and uncle were amongst them.

He said he was never able to establish exactly what had happened to them. But a Bosnian Serb army combat report presented by the prosecution said that a group of 200 Muslim fighters captured at Grabovci at the same day was "brutally massacred" in revenge for the death of a Serb soldier and the wounding of four others.

The next morning, Elvedin and others were allowed to get on a bus to take them to Bosnian-held territory. But they first had to walk through a corridor of local Serb civilians - "slowly, so that they could beat us with wooden sticks and throw stones at us," Elvedin told the court, tears running down his face.

"I was the last one to go. They beat me hard on the back and when I finally reached the bus, a Serb woman all dressed in black grabbed a knife and said she would kill me. I was petrified. A soldier pushed her away and threw me into the bus."

At that point, Elvedin began to sob uncontrollably while the judges, prosecutors and defence team stared on, visibly moved.

Finally, Judge Alphons Orié thanked the witness and wished him a safe trip home.

“I also wish you a lot of strength, because to live with what you’ve been through, you will need that strength in the future,” he said.

Two more witnesses testified at the trial of Momcilo Krajisnik this week about events in the towns of Trnovo and Kotor Varos before and after their capture by Serb forces in 1992.

Both towns are listed among 37 Bosnian municipalities in Krajisnik's indictment where Muslims and other non-Serbs were subject to persecution and systematic killings, allegedly planned and commissioned by Krajisnik and other top Bosnian Serb politicians.

Bosnian Muslim Omer Vatric testified about the heavy shelling of Trnovo, some 20 kilometres southeast of Sarajevo, which resulted in a mass exodus of its Muslim population in May 1992. Vatric said that on the eve of the attack all Serbs from Trnovo suddenly left the town, only to return a few days later after the Muslims had fled.

According to Vatric's testimony, the attack was carefully planned and its aim was to expel the Muslims from the area.

Protected witness 144 told the court how Muslims and Croats were forced to leave the northern Bosnian town of Kotor Varos after June 11, 1992, when Serb forces took control of the municipality.

At that time, the witness was a member of the municipal defence council and the Bosnian Muslim party, the SDA. He told the story of how, at one of the council's meetings in 1992, a Croat representative suggested that members of his community were ready to leave the town and take their belongings with them – but asked for compensation for the houses they were planning to leave.

The witness said this proposal angered the local president of Krajisnik's Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, Nedeljko Djukanovic, who told the man, “You will not be leaving when you see it fit, but when and how we [Serbs] decide.”

The witness was arrested by Serb forces in July 1992 and detained in the Kotor Varos elementary school and later in the local prison. There he was interrogated, beaten and tortured by members of the Bosnian Serb special forces, before being exchanged months later.

The trial will continue next week.

Merdijana Sadovic is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

**Location:** Bosnia and Herzegovina

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