

Kvočka Takes The Stand In Camps Trial.

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The trial of four Bosnian Serbs accused of crimes committed at the infamous Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje detention camps in northwest Bosnia in 1992 finally gets underway.

The trial of four men accused of crimes committed at the infamous Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje camps in north-west Bosnia in 1992 got underway last week. Thirteen people have been publicly accused under the indictment, but nine of those - including camp commanders Zeljko Meakic and Dusko Sikirica - are still at large.

Appearing in court last week were Miroslav Kvočka, Milojica Kos, Mladjo Radic and Zoran Zigic. According to the amended indictment Kvočka was first commander of Omarska camp and then deputy commander. Kos and Radic were guard shift commanders, also at Omarska. Zigic, according to the prosecutor, was a "regular visitor" at all three camps "for the purpose of beating, torturing, murdering, harassing and robbing prisoners."

"This trial is about a government policy of persecution and ethnic cleansing," said prosecutor Grant Niemann in his opening statement. He acknowledged that the crimes were certainly committed by many more people than the four men in the dock.

"It consisted of a large number of politicians, police and military leaders and loyal followers of the Republika Srpska. It was this puppet entity dangling from the strings of [Yugoslav President] Slobodan Milosevic that turned it's police and military forces upon it's own people in a quest to participate in the grand achievement of an ethnically pure Greater Serbia."

Defence lawyer, Krsten Simic, objected to the phrase "puppet entity" as Republika Srpska was "recognised by the Dayton agreement and that it is today one of two equal entities of Bosnia-Herzegovina."

Niemann replied that he was referring to a time before Dayton and had no intention of withdrawing the remark. Presiding judge Rodrigues put a halt to the polemics, concluding that "there is no need for this to be debated."

Niemann went on to describe the founding of the camps Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje as "a part of the plan of the leadership of Bosnian Serbs to cleanse the Prijedor municipality of the non-Serbian population."

Using video footage, photographs and other documents, the prosecutor described, in great detail, the creation, purpose and function of the camps. Niemann argued the camps were "an integral part of the machinery of persecution of the non-Serb population of Prijedor, exposed to an extremely cruel and inhuman campaign of terror."

Niemann announced that the prosecution would present sufficient evidence to "show beyond any reasonable doubt that thousands of Muslim and Croat detainees suffered and lost lives in those camps only because of their ethnicity."

The prosecution plan to present a large volume of evidence, including documents showing decisions and orders from the Crisis Headquarters, police reports and records from SDS municipal board meetings (confiscated by investigators during searches in Prijedor and Banja Luka).

Niemann said political and police organs in Republika Srpska had left a lot of written traces that point to the organised and systematic character of their discriminatory efforts to ethnically cleanse that part of Bosnia-Herzegovina of the non-Serb population.

The prosecutor argued that these efforts had been largely successful. Prijedor, he pointed out, had been "cleansed" of some 90 per cent of its Muslim inhabitants and 50 per cent of its Croat residents.

Following the prosecutor's opening remarks, the Tribunal witnessed an innovation in proceedings - the suspects Kvocka and Radic were announced as the first witnesses at the trial. The defence counsels for Kvocka and Radic told Tribunal Update that they do not intend to dispute the conditions and crimes committed in the Omarska camp, because the accused accept these facts have been established in previous trials. Rather they plan to challenge the roles and specific criminal acts attributed to their clients. Furthermore by not challenging evidence as to conditions in the camp, the defence hope to demonstrate their clients are co-operating with the court.

Hence Kvocka followed on from the prosecutor and testified for three days telling the court about his life, his mixed marriage to a Muslim wife, his Muslim brothers-in-law and friends, and his long and impeccable police career.

Kvocka disputed prosecution claims that he was commander and deputy commander at Omarska. He insisted he was only a "common policeman" during his 25 days at the camp, with no authority over anyone. Kvocka said his role was simply to "physically secure the object with the detainees in it".

At the beginning of June 1992, due to an increased influx of inmates, "physical security" was reinforced with soldiers, police reservists and special police units from Banja Luka who, Kvocka stated, "were said to maltreat the people, take their money or jewellery and beat them."

According to Kvocka, the local policemen had no role in the investigation of detainees. Such "processing" was carried out by a "mixed group" of investigators from public, state and military security. The local police only brought the requested people for interrogation.

Kvocka said that one could conclude from the "unnatural sounds and cries" that "force was applied" during some interrogations. On one occasion Kvocka said he stormed into the room from where a cry could be heard and stated that it was "visible that one person was beaten up." Kvocka claimed he "reacted vehemently", but that the inspector conducting the interrogation laughed and said, "everything is all right."

Kvocka said he was harassed by his colleagues due to his Muslim wife and her three brothers, who took refuge in his house. He was looked upon with suspicion, as a "collaborator" or "friend" to Muslims. Kvocka said he went to see the Prijedor chief of police, Sima Drljaca - shot dead by British SFOR troops in July 1997 - to ask for help. He said he explained that his brothers-in-law and wife had been "investigated" and were "clean", but that Drljaca simply jumped from his chair and shouted, "Maybe you aren't a Serb either? Take off your pants for me to see."

The day after this encounter with Drljaca, who according to Kvocka was "lord of life and death at the camp," he was summoned to the public security station and ordered to take the three brothers and his wife to an "investigation centre" at Omarska. Being an "exemplary policeman", Kvocka said he obeyed this order and that this was his last visit to the camp. A confirmation notice issued in March 1998 that "policeman Kvocka, Miroslav worked at Omarska camp until June 23, 1992" was presented as evidence to the court. Kvocka said he was transferred to Tukovi police station.

Radic is expected to follow Kvočka in the witness box. The remaining two accused, Kos and Zigic, will not testify in this phase of the proceedings.

Location: Serbia
Bosnia and
Herzegovina

Focus: International Criminal Tribunal for the former
Yugoslavia

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