

A Survivor's Story

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Former prisoner tells how he escaped death at the hands of a Serb execution squad.

Mevludin Oric, now 35, is one of only a handful of men to survive capture by Serb troops in the days after they overran Srebrenica ten years ago.

Wan, thin, and struggling to build a life in the wake of an experience that has left him forever scarred, Oric recently recounted his dramatic story to Balkan Crisis Report in his scrappy flat on the outskirts of Sarajevo.

Oric was born in Srebrenica, but when the town was cut off at the beginning of the war, he was in Tuzla. His wife and newborn daughter were still in Srebrenica, so Oric walked for several days through enemy territory back to Srebrenica.

During the siege, he served in the Bosnian army as an ammunition courier.

When the town fell, Mevludin was among those who elected not to hand themselves over to the Serb troops who were separating men from women and children, but rather to join a column of men who attempted to make their way through the forests to Bosnian government territory.

That journey is now known as the "Road of Death", and Oric's story explains why.

The column - several thousand strong - made steady progress inching its way from Srebrenica to Tuzla, a route Oric had come to know well during the war. But as the men came upon the village of Konjevic Polje, they were surrounded by Serb forces.

They had no choice but to surrender. "None of us had guns, and they took us," said Oric.

First, Oric went by bus to the now infamous warehouse in Kravica where some 1000 men and boys would soon be executed. The warehouse was full, Oric says, and other men were packed into "a field full of prisoners, sitting on the ground with their hands behind their heads".

The bus, now joined by a convoy of others vehicles, then went on to Bratunac, to the Vuk Karadzic school, the site of a massacre of Muslims in 1992.

"Inside the school, we could hear screaming and shooting. We couldn't fit in there. They told us to wait on the bus because there was no room. I prayed for dawn to come, and for us to move on," said Oric.

The convoy headed north, through the valley town of Zvornik, after which it turned off the main road. It was at that point that Oric began to suspect that he and all of the other prisoners would be killed.

Five busloads and six truckloads of men then arrived at a school in the village of Grbavici, where they were packed into the gym.

"It was so hot, people were fainting. They gave us water, but we fought over it so that it spilt, and men were licking it off the floor," he said.

Then, into the gym, walked General Ratko Mladic himself - "laughing with his bodyguards" - with news that the men would be taken to a camp.

Two prisoners were selected to stand by the door and blindfold the others as they made their way back towards the trucks and buses. Oric was in the sixth truck, along with his nephew, Haris.

"We huddled up, so that if we were going to a camp we could be together," said Oric.

The Serb troops took the men to a field, ordering them to line up.

"I knew what was coming. I could see bodies in the field. They were cocking their guns. I took Haris by the hand; he asked 'are they going to kill us?'; I said no, then they started shooting. Haris was hit; I was holding him, he took the bullet and we both fell. Nothing hit me; I just threw myself on the ground; my nephew shook, and died on top of me," said Oric.

Oric remained lying, face down, for the rest of the day.

"When they finished shooting, they went back to get other groups. They kept bringing new rounds of men.

I could hear crying and pleading, but they kept on shooting. It went on all day," he said.

At one point, Serb soldiers began shooting dead and half-dead men through the head, but somehow, Oric was spared.

For a while, he says, he lost consciousness. By the time he awoke, it was dark and had started to rain.

With his nephew's body still on top of him, Oric removed his blindfold and saw light coming from bulldozers that were already digging mass graves.

"By then, the Chetniks (a Bosniak word for Serbian extremists) were tired and drunk, and still shooting by the light of the bulldozers. They went to those who were wounded and played around with them. 'Are you alive?' and if the man said 'Yes', they would shoot and ask again, 'Are you alive?' And if the answer came, they would shoot again," said Oric.

When the lights were finally turned off, Oric moved out from underneath his nephew. He stood up to find himself in a field of corpses.

"They were everywhere, as far as I could see," he said. All he could do at that moment was cry. "I could not stop myself," he recalled.

To his amazement, he saw another man on his feet.

"I thought I was dreaming, seeing things," he said. "I walked towards him; I had to step on bodies to get to him - there was no patch of land without bodies. I hugged and kissed him."

The other survivor was Hurem Suljic, and he was injured and could barely walk. Together, Oric and Suljic walked through the forests to Tuzla, narrowly escaping ambush and death many times. Their journey to government territory took 11 days.

For a long time after the fall of Srebrenica, Oric lived with his wife and daughter in school outside of Tuzla. That was followed by a brief stay in the United States where Oric worked in a factory, an experience that proved to be lonely and alienating.

Today, Oric is back in Bosnia where he lives in emergency accommodation built by the Dutch government and leased to local authorities in Ilias, just outside of Sarajevo.

He survives on a share of his mother's retirement pension, with which he must provide for his four children and wife, Hadzira, who suffers from schizophrenia. He spends his days going down to the employment office in Ilias, to be told that there is no work.

"Time can never fade those memories," said Oric. "I can recall every face of the dead I happened to see; every word we said along the way to Tuzla."

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Location: [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

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