

HASAN HASANOVIĆ

"It was late at night when I heard the men were planning to move. All day, the UN troops said help was coming, but by nightfall, nothing had happened. We were beginning to hear that UN soldiers were abandoning their positions, and retreating without resistance. We were all shocked. They had demilitarised Srebrenica completely; Bosniak soldiers were made to hand over their weapons. But now, the UN themselves were backing down.

I was sat with my twin brother, Husein, and my father, and we knew then that if we wanted to survive, we would have to join the column.

We were amidst thousands and thousands of men. As far as my eyes could see, there were men walking — from teenagers, to old withered men. We were all supposed to gather on Buljim Hill, approximately six miles from Srebrenica, and set off from there. We were headed to Tuzla, the nearest Muslim territory. On foot, Tuzla is just over 63 miles from Srebrenica, and you have to pass lots of uneven terrain, mountains, rivers, even minefields. It wasn't going to be an easy journey, but we had no other option. We wanted to live.

We all gathered on the hill, and began assembling into a column. My uncle, who was with us, said it was best to remain in the middle of The Column. I was only 19 at the time, so I didn't argue with his decision. As we continued to assemble in line, I heard an onslaught of gunfire. The key hill positions were under the control of the Serb military, so they had a good view of us all lining up.

They didn't care that we were unarmed. Their primary concern was that we were Muslim, and they wanted us dead. In the commotion of the gunfire, people in the column started to push forward in a panic, desperate for shelter from the bullets. Bodies fell to the ground behind us, but no one knew exactly what was happening. The gunfire was relentless, and it felt like it was coming from every angle.

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I could think of nothing but pushing forward. Forward was freedom; forward was survival, forward was everything. I pushed forward with all my might, until finally from the sea of men ahead, I saw woodland. I realised at that moment that I had lost my family. Husein, my father, and my uncle. As much as I wanted to stop and look for them, I knew if I did, I would be killed. I told myself if I wanted to live, I would have to run and not look back.

So, I ran. I ran with countless others into the woods. If we turned back, we would have to go to Potočari, and we were sure the UN would give us up to the Serb army. They had already given up Srebrenica, and by doing so, sacrificed our lives.

It was now well into the afternoon on 12th July. We had lost complete contact with the front of The Column. We tried to walk faster in an attempt to catch them up, but suddenly we were under fire again. I could see bullets smacking into tree trunks all around me, and I realised how close they were. I held my breath and hid behind a tree. We were all so afraid. At that moment, I felt all my strength drain away.

We waited for what felt like hours. As the gunfire subsided, we began to walk again. A man offered me sugar and water, which I graciously accepted and swallowed in seconds.

As night fell, we began to catch up with the front of The Column. When a few hundred of us had gathered, all exhausted, and some wounded, we decided to take a break. We settled in the woodlands, some on the ground, others slumped over rocks. I couldn't look at anyone. The instinct to survive is a powerful one, but nothing spells death like the face of a helpless man. So, we just looked away from each other.

The next day, we had been walking for hours when we all gathered on Kamenica Hill, approximately 37 miles from Tuzla. I thought we would take some rest here, but once again, the gunfire began. One thousand men were massacred on the spot. Those of us near the front of the column managed to break away, and seek shelter in the forest. Hidden from view, we could hear Serb voices on the loudspeakers for hours. They were promising safety, shelter and food. They said they wouldn't hurt us, and that we should come out of hiding.

Tanks blocked all the roads, so we had two options: stay in the forest, or give in and be killed. Those that gave up were encouraged to call on their relatives to do the same. Men shouted the names of their fathers, sons, brothers; they assured them that there was nothing to fear, and that the Serbs wouldn't harm them. That day was the bloodiest of them all for The Column. We heard later that thousands of men had been captured, tortured, and subsequently killed on 13th July.

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In the early hours of the next day, those of us who had managed to escape reached Konjević Polje, a central intersection on a long road, which goes from Sarajevo Srebrenica. One route of the intersection leads to Bratunac, and the other to Tuzla. Exhausted and in pain, we headed through the forest in the direction of Tuzla. It felt like I was walking and sleeping at the same time. I was never sure if I was in complete consciousness.

Just then, a man hit my shoulder from behind. He yelled that a Serb tank was coming. We all fell to the ground, and remained completely still. Luckily, the tank passed by and we went unnoticed. We waited until the road was clear, and continued to run towards Tuzla.

After hours and hours of walking, we came to a river. We all struggled to cross. We weren't soldiers that had prepared for this kind of journey. We were just ordinary men. I could feel my feet burn as I crossed the river. When I reached the other side, I fell to the ground and kicked off my boots in agony. The skin on the bottom of my feet had peeled off completely. The combination of the rubber boots, the water, and the hours of walking had taken their toll. It was excruciatingly painful. I took off my t-shirt, ripped it in two, and wrapped my feet in it. I fell back to the ground exhausted, and bellowed, "I want to sleep!" A man responded, "If you sleep now, you'll sleep forever."

By the time we arrived at the Baljkovica Valley, I was carouseling on the edge of life and death. I had barely drunk any water, and my only sustenance had been a bit of sugar that my father's friend had given me before he gave himself up. As we arrived at the valley, we were forced to take cover again. I hid in a stream for two hours as the Serb military and the few Bosnian with arms exchanged gunfire. A few hours later, everything fell silent, and we were told to cross the valley quickly.

We finally arrived in the free territory of Zvornik. I couldn't believe I had survived. The people of Nezuk village welcomed us with food and water. There were lines of busses and trucks, which we were ushered onto. I fell asleep on the bus, and when I awoke, it was dark. We had arrived at a school building. We were told that we would stop here for the night. The school had been ransacked, and there was nothing left but the roof, the walls, and the concrete floors. Exhausted, we all found a spot on the floor and fell asleep.

The next morning, we got up and had some breakfast. We were then ushered onto the busses. I had no idea where we were going, but I didn't care. I just followed the line ahead. I was consumed with thoughts of my brother and father. And I felt that if following the line ahead had made me survive the Death March, then maybe there was some hope of reuniting with my mother. I fell asleep on the bus, and was awoken by the driver. I had walked five days, and six nights, and finally, I was in Tuzla.

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The bus stop was filled with women from Srebrenica. As I stepped off, women began asking me about their loved ones, describing what their fathers, brothers or husbands were wearing, and telling me their names, asking if I had seen them. I was at a loss. I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to upset them, but the truth was that they were probably all dead.

A lady ushered me through the crowd, and asked if I had anywhere to go. I said no. For the next two weeks, she and her family took care of me. They gave me a place to stay, food and clothes. I'll never forget their generosity.

I later found out that most women and children were being held at Tuzla airport, which had become a makeshift refugee camp. When I arrived there, I saw an endless field of white tents. They went on for miles and miles.

I went over to the administration desk, and asked them to make an announcement. People began to flock towards the desk when they heard I had come from Srebrenica. They asked about their loved ones, asked if I knew what had happened to them. I kept apologising, and saying I didn't know. I said I was praying that they too would return. Then from amidst the crowd, I spotted my mother with my younger brother, and my grandparents. I couldn't believe it. We gripped each other tightly, and thanked God for reuniting us.

Till this day, I cannot believe I was part of The Column. Everyday, I wonder where I got that strength. When you're in that kind of situation, where every step is a matter of life and death, your mind just works differently.

The experience has stayed with me since then. It follows me everyday; from the moment I get up, to the moment I go to sleep. I just can't get rid of it. The worst thing is the anguish that comes with thinking about Husein and my father — wondering how they were killed, whether they were tortured or not, and how long it took them to die. That pain is almost unbearable.

I moved back to Srebrenica in 2009, when I started working for the Memorial Center as a curator and translator.

Sometimes, it's painful being here, but it's my home. It's where I belong. I'm married now, and I have a beautiful three-year-old daughter. I hope my work at the Center inspires her, and keeps her in touch with the story of her grandfather and her uncle.

This experience is also part of her history, her heritage, and I want it to shape her life; the decisions she makes, and eventually the person she becomes. What I do on a daily basis is painful, because I have to recount my story — five, six times a day. But I want to speak to people, and share my story because my heart speaks. And now, finally, someone is listening.