

Sabit Jakupović



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Sabit came to the UK from Bosnia in 1992 as part of a group of 68 people who were selected by the International Red Cross, as they needed immediate hospital care. He had been imprisoned for 120 days in two different Bosnian concentration camps, one of which was the notorious Omarska camp.



'Growing up I strongly believed in brotherhood and unity - we weren't different, apart from knowing that there were different religions, we all were Bosnians.'

Sabit Jakupović was born on 2 January 1967 in Kevljani, a village near Prijedor in Western Bosnia (then part of Yugoslavia). He had a very happy childhood growing up in a large family where there was always something to do. Sabit's country was diverse – with Bosnian Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) all living together. Sabit and his family were Bosniaks and he went to primary and secondary school in neighbouring villages that were predominantly Bosnian Serb, but he never felt any different from anyone else.

In the 1990s, there was conflict and war in the region, and Yugoslavia began to be broken up into separate countries. Bosnia declared its independence in 1992, which was resisted by the Bosnian Serb population, who were fighting for 'Republika Srpska' – an independent Serbian state in Bosnia. This led to conflict between Bosnian Serbs and the rest of the population, particularly Bosniaks, who were targeted and persecuted by Bosnian Serb troops.

In May 1992, when Sabit was 25, Prijedor and its surrounding areas were attacked by Bosnian Serb forces. After about 22 hours of heavy fire, the village was given an ultimatum - they had an hour to surrender or the fighting would continue. Many villagers had children, and all were poorly armed, they had no choice but to surrender.

As he was Bosniak, Sabit was imprisoned and spent 120 days in two different concentration camps. First he was taken to Omarska, where he spent 72 days. Conditions were dire, and detainees were treated inhumanely, with people being beaten up and killed every day and night. In the first weeks Sabit was held in a shower cubicle with three others. They were not given any food for the first five days, and then were given less than a meal a day.

After being processed and interrogated, Sabit was moved to another room in Omarska, where he slept on the floor with approximately 170 other people. Many people became ill with diarrhoea due to the awful conditions. They were not allowed to wash and had to keep the door open when they used the toilet. If anyone went to the toilet at night they risked being beaten or killed.

Like many of the other prisoners, Sabit knew a few of the guards at Omarska as it was so close to his home village where Bosniaks and Serbs had lived together. One guard had been Sabit's classmate for four years at school. One night that guard took one of Sabit's childhood friends outside and he never came back. Years later his friend's remains were found in a mass grave. The night after his disappearance the same guard pulled Sabit outside, and he was afraid. However,

the guard just talked for a while about their home village then sent Sabit back inside. They never spoke again.

In August 1992, British journalists Penny Marshall, Ian Williams and Ed Vulliamy gained access to the concentration camps at Omarska and Trnopolje, where they gathered footage of the conditions. The inhumane treatment of Bosnian Muslims and Croats was broadcast to the rest of the world and the Serbian forces found themselves under international scrutiny. Omarska was closed and Sabit and three of his brothers were transferred to Manjača concentration camp, whilst his oldest brother was transferred to Trnopolje. He remembers the journey from Omarska to Manjača as one of the worst times, with no food or drink and extremely hot conditions.

At Manjača, the detainees were stripped and examined for valuables. Sabit was separated from his brothers. Shortly after he arrived, the International Red Cross gained access to the camp. Conditions improved - detainees were registered and given two meals a day. But they were still being treated as prisoners.

On 15 September 1992, the International Red Cross and the British Government secured the release of 68 prisoners who were in the worst condition and brought them to the UK for hospital treatment. Sabit was in this group, but he had to leave the rest of his family behind.

'We were told "you're going", we were also told that the President of the Republika Srpska pardoned us. Pardoned me of what? I don't know.'

Within hours, Sabit went from camp detainee to free and safe in Hertford County Hospital. He had his first shower in 120 days, he was given clean clothes and a healthy meal. He remembers sitting out on the balcony of the hospital:

'And that was one of the very hard moments because I felt safe, and I felt lost. I was in a completely different country, different weather, different language. Then I remembered that I left my brothers behind. Those emotions were tearing me apart, you can't enjoy the freedom and liberty because the war is still happening.'

Sabit remained in hospital for a few weeks and then started the process of being given housing in Britain, first with the other rescued prisoners in a building run by the council and then at a permanent home in Hertford. His brothers were kept in the camps for another three months before being transferred to Croatia. From there, three of his brothers joined him in the UK and his youngest brother went to Canada. Much later, Sabit and his brothers were joined by their parents and one of their sisters, and their family decided to make their home in Britain.

Sabit began rebuilding his life. He got married and in 1995 he and his wife had a child. He learnt to speak English and started working. In 2006, he graduated from university and now works for Hertfordshire County Council. Sabit feels Britain has become his home, but he also feels lost:

'I am in limbo status. I won't be able to go back, I will never go back, but there is a part of my life that I cannot just walk away from. Even if I go now, my village is not the same, all I have is my memories, everything else has been destroyed. Part of me will always be there, no matter how hard I try to settle here.'

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Life stories of those affected by genocide: hmd.org.uk/lifestories