

Zana Mujezinovic aged 17

# How to survive

We hadn't eaten for seven days since we were captured and that house in sight might have been a good sign of some food or at least water that hadn't been poisoned. We got off those buses. There were 11 of them full of women and children.

**A**s we followed the drivers and some of the men who waited there for us, I didn't know where to turn to any more. Those dark-dirty walls that made the house look dead and scary on one side and on the other side a wall with shining daylight pushing through tiny holes. The floor was covered with crushed glass. It seemed like it was telling us something, maybe something we all waited for. Better said, we didn't know what to wait for any more. Was it survival or death? The walls might have been telling us something but which side do we choose: the dark one or the other dark one with a little light that was like a sign of survival? Maybe in the end our destiny would be chosen by others and not by us.

In the house they put us all into one huge room. It was as huge as half a soccer field. It had no furniture except old mattresses in the corner which were ripped and full of blood marks. The window was hidden behind a dark curtain. The people in the room were terrified, tired, confused, hungry and God knows what else. Impatiently we waited for the next instruction. All of a sudden there was screaming, howling, you couldn't even understand what was happening. The next thing I saw was the young girls and boys (from the age of 12) being put into the corner where the dead mattresses were. As a seven-year-old, I just stood there questioning what was happening, why are they separating kids away from their mothers, asking myself why are they crying so much? But the questions didn't seem like they were going to be answered for me.

Suddenly my mum grabbed my brother and me and pulled us close as if someone was taking us away from her. My brother was the victim. A monster, so he looked to me, was pulling him

away from us. "He's only 11, what do you need him for?" a loud voice above me shouted at the monster. In all that confusion I realised that we were pushed in a small group into a tiny room that looked more like a garage with a double door instead of a roller door. All you could see in that room was handbags thrown onto the ground, which was covered with blood marks.

There were three men standing, all in their army uniform, armed from head to toe. The guy on the door captured my eyes as I realised where I was. He had a long beard running from his upper lip down to his chest. The worst thing that made me even more scared was seeing the blood dripping down his beard. Around his waist he had a gun, a knife, a baseball bat and other things a criminal would have.

One of them approached my mum. He was asking for all the money and gold she had. Her trembling hand reached into her pocket and pulled out everything she had to satisfy him, but no, it wasn't satisfactory, and he smacked her with a bat and asked for more. As she got into a disagreement, he said to the guy at the door to take my mum away, take all her clothes off, and if he found anything to slaughter her, but was slaughter the word or was there more to it. In that moment my brother and I

started crying, begging him to leave our mum alone, but he couldn't care less about us, or maybe he would take us as well. As another group was pushed into the room, my mum was pushed on the side, giving her the opportunity to take the rest of the money and gold out of her pants. I don't know how she managed to approach him with the rest but she did and he replied, "I knew you have more, there is no need to lie, Muslim b\*\*\*\*." Then he took his bat and smacked her again across the back. I don't know how she managed to stand on her feet, but she did. She grabbed my brother and me and dragged herself out of that house. The walls were made of bricks like every house in Bosnia. The floor was dirty with no carpets and on the side there were only packing crates. The whole house stank like there were dead bodies lying around. As we stepped out into the fresh air the guy that caught my eye hit my mum one more time and tried to threaten her. He grabbed me and yelled, "Where do you think you are going with those earrings in your ears?" As my mum pulled me towards her he grabbed my ear and all I could see was blood. The pain was stronger than when I had my ears first pierced. Outside there were two trucks waiting for us to be transported to

another house about two hours drive away.

Despite all the humiliation my mother went through she maintains her dignity. She is a dignified woman. She is a strong woman but my brother and I made her even stronger. She knew she had to fight to be able to protect us and some day, with or without our father, provide a stable home. The strength she had I've never seen. Seven days without eating, giving me and my brother the last crumbs she found in her pockets, drinking poisoned water and being beaten and still she managed to stay straight on her feet. It was admirable.

That night we settled into a house that they provided for us. It was located in bush with

many trees and uncut grass. It looked like a jungle, which I have only seen in cartoons. The house was built out of bricks but wasn't finished yet. There was nothing inside. The walls weren't even painted; you could feel the air coming through. We would have to sleep on the cold floor or on the little clothing we had taken with us. But unluckily my mum forgot the bag outside in the garden where we had spent the day, so we couldn't even sleep on our clothes. It was a warm sunny day: if only we lived in peace. But at least we met a nice guy. He showed us where to find clean water and he also told my mum a secret.

My mum asked a guy in the house to go get the bag

from where she left it. He said I'll open the door and you can go get it, I'll come with you. That's when it clicked in my head and I started crying. My mum ran back to me to see what was wrong but I couldn't tell her because that guy was looking. I begged her to stay and not to worry about the bag but she was determined to get it. She started walking with that guy towards the door, when my aunty called her back and offered herself to go get the bag. She was an older lady in her sixties. As my mum came back she gave up thinking about the bag and realised that our lives were more important.

The house was full of women and children and since we were one of the last

ones in, we had to sleep under the roof. It was very unsafe where we tried to fall asleep. We lay next to an open area, which looked down onto the first floor. Since the house wasn't finished it didn't have a fence on the stairs or that area where we slept. The noise of grenades and guns made it impossible for us to fall asleep because they were basically falling somewhere near us. You could feel them and sometimes it felt that bullets were knocking on the roof, which was right above our heads. I was lying there on the cold floor, covered by my mother's body, praying to God that one of those grenades or bullets wouldn't hit through the roof.

In the morning as I woke up the first thing I noticed was that my mum wasn't there. As we reached the door my mum entered. She hugged us both and whispered, "Lucky I didn't go out last night, there are three women missing." They went out for a smoke, which they were given by those horrible people, and never came back. We were ordered to get out of the house as quickly as possible. No one knew what was going on. As we all stood there in front of the house, they started giving us instructions where to go. No one knew where we were going to or what to look forward to. Exhausted, famished, dehydrated ... we headed through the biggest war zone on that side of Bosnia. It was 30°C and we were without food or water. The closest village was 20km away. There were old women dying on their feet. We couldn't do anything about it then, just leave them on the side of the street and save ourselves. I walked with my

mum, brother and some other relatives through the emptiness of the village, city, world, whatever you want to call it. I'd never seen such things before. Even my mum said she never saw such an inhumanity in this world, even in the movies. There were dead bodies lying everywhere and some even hanging down the fences. But the thing that caught my eye wasn't the people who have died because I've seen my grandmother dead: it was the people who were slaughtered and the babies that a dumb person could tell were killed with bare hands.

My father was taken away before this experience. Now our thoughts focused on his destiny. We knew that he was taken to a different camp with the rest of the men from the town we stayed at, but if he was alive no one knew. We heard that there were a few camps set up, but one of them we heard that no men came out of alive. All we could hope for was that he wasn't taken to a death camp. Every day we asked ourselves if he was suffering from pain. Or did he manage to escape from wherever they took him? Maybe he was back at home but that wasn't safe either.

I didn't know that it would take six months to see him again nor did I know that my new home would be Australia.

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