HOW TO CATCH A WAR CRIMINAL (IN BEAVERTON)

By Nigel Duara

THIRTY-THREE minutes before sunrise one April morning, a man in black tactical gear slammed a battering ram through a cheap plywood door at a run-down Beaverton apartment complex, 50 feet from the Tualatin Valley Highway. He and a half-dozen armed officers poured into the second-floor apartment, screaming for anyone inside to come out, palms open, hands up. A woman named Sammy Yetisen emerged, as did her father and her son, a grade-schooler. ¶ Down the street, in an unmarked car, sat the man who'd spent months studying Yetisen. Ted Weimann, a Portland-based investigator for the Department of Homeland Security, had woven the details of this woman's life, behavior, and movements into his own routine—his morning gym workout, the books on tape he consumed while watching her house. ¶ The agents led Yetisen to the car. Weimann had planned it this way: after the noisy chaos of the extraction, he would stage his own first encounter with Yetisen in a quiet, even consoling environment. They drove in silence, 25 minutes through the predawn streets, to a squat, off-white brick building in Southwest Portland. They walked in silence through double glass doors, past a metal detector, to a dimly lit room with a table and two chairs. ¶ Weimann told Yetisen to sit. She was 39 years old, heavyset, with a nest of tangled black hair framing heavy-lidded, drowsy eyes and a soft chin. He pulled his chair in close. From a manila folder, he produced a grainy black-and-white photograph of a young woman holding an automatic weapon, taken sometime in the early 1990s. ¶ This is you, he said. And this is your gun. You named it Rose.

THE STING

TED WEIMANN—49 years old in 2011, when his team arrested Sammy Yetisen—worked as a part of the Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Unit, a little-known outfit within the federal Department of Homeland Security. Vast, rootless, with so many churning cities and faceless suburbs, the US will always attract people on the run. Weimann and his colleagues faced the task of separating malefactors from those who come here for legitimate reasons.

"We're quite sure a lot of human rights violators live in the US," says a federal Department of Justice official not authorized to speak on the record, noting that former victims live here, too. "When refugees seek a new life here, they deserve to be free of a security threat. We want to be seen as a place where they can find freedom."

It is a challenging, often frustrating gig. While the team's targets are suspected of major political and military crimes, their alleged actions are often decades old, potential witnesses often dead. In the event of an arrest, the US usually finds it simplest to extradite suspects for immigration violations, and let their home country deal with them.

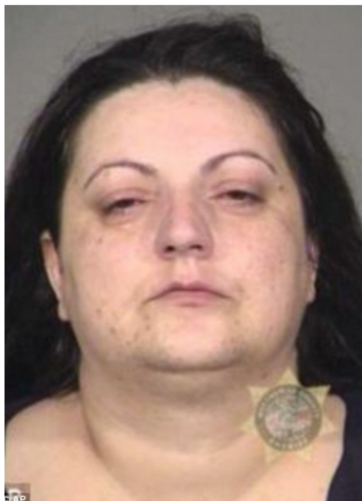
All the same, Weimann is part of a storied law-enforcement tradition. The federal Office of Special Investigations (OSI) chased fugitive Nazis from 1979 to 2010; now time is resolving what OSI's detective work could not. (A scattering of suspected Auschwitz guards arrested early this year were all in their late 80s or 90s.) Dying Nazis don't make for compelling budget requests, so Weimann's office, a successor of sorts to OSI, generally focuses on the period between Vietnam and 9/11, a grim litany of child soldiers in Africa, Guatemalan death squads, kidnappings in Colombia.

Bosnia stands out as a special case. An estimated 100,000 people died in conflicts that erupted as Yugoslavia collapsed in the 1990s. In the aftermath, tens of thousands of Bosnians moved to the US—over

1,400 settled in the Portland area in 1996 alone. In the US, divisions blur, making war criminals elusive.

"Unlike Nazis, who tended to avoid Jewish diaspora communities, these people do live in the same neighborhoods as the people they've tortured," says the Justice Department official.

As he sat in that room in the nondescript Immigration and Customs Enforcement building with Sammy Yetisen, Weimann believed he was looking at one player in Bosnia's bloody story. Over his 24 years with the department, he had tackled all manner of immigration fraud, gunrunning, and drug trafficking. His work had helped make him adept at procuring the most essential piece of evidence in any investigation into long-ago, faraway offenses: the confession.



YOU COULD trace what happened in Bosnia back to 1914, when a Serbian separatist assassinated an Austrian archduke in Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital, triggering World War I. And you could go back even further, into the complicated mosaic of ethnicity and religion that briefly held together as Yugoslavia. But for present purposes, Sammy Yetisen's story begins on April 16, 1993, in a small village called Trusina.

The new Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, dominated by a fragile coalition of Croatians and Bosniak Muslims, had been fighting Serbian forces since 1991. As the conflict dragged on, relations between Croats and Muslims deteriorated. One spring morning in Trusina, the rickety alliance shattered.

"FIRE SQUAD!" ONE OFFICER SHOUTED. "ATTENTION! SHOOT! FIRE!"

The Zulfikar Special Purposes Detachment included the toughest commandos in the Bosniak Muslim forces. Rumor had it that they took orders straight from President Alija Izetbegović. They stalked contested cities and towns, sometimes wearing no uniform insignia. Unusually, their ranks included a woman: they called her Zolja, which roughly translates to "wasp."

At about 6 a.m. on April 16, the Zulfikar unit moved to occupy Trusina, a tiny but strategically important village in the foothills of the Ore Mountains, split between Croats and Muslims. (This account is based on testimony of former unit soldiers, transcribed by prosecutors in Bosnia.) One soldier in the unit remembered hearing a comrade say: "We should not leave a single hen alive."

The troops soon rounded up four uniformed Croatian soldiers and about a dozen civilian men and lined them up against a wall. Just then, word arrived that a popular officer, known as Samko, had been shot by Croatian forces and was bleeding badly. Samko was Zolja's boyfriend.

A unit member testified that, a moment later, he heard a rifle cocked. "Fire squad, attention!" one officer shouted. "Shoot! Fire!" The line of men crumpled. According to multiple witnesses within the unit, Zolja then pulled a pistol, walked to the fallen men showing signs of life, and shot them each in the head.

A rampage ensued. Within about 90 minutes, 22 people, including 17 civilians, were killed.

The woman who operated under the nom de guerre Zolja allegedly participated in other incidents war crimes investigators would pursue, notably the kidnapping and execution of Italian aid workers. Then she disappeared. By the time the US-mediated Dayton Accords established a tenuous peace in 1994, the Trusina massacre was just one of many atrocities. It was not, however, forgotten.

MOST OFTEN, when the Secret Service catches you making an unauthorized approach to a former president, they arrest you. In Ted Weimann's case, they offered career advice.

In the early 1980s, Weimann was a student at the University of Vermont; Gerald Ford arrived to speak to an invitation-only crowd. "I had an environmental question to ask him," Weimann says now, with a small smile. "But I wasn't invited."

The Secret Service locked all the doors and windows and roped off the building. No matter how tightly they secured the area, agents kept finding one particular student inside. The first time, they were angry. The second, baffled. The third time, when a man in a black suit asked Weimann how the hell he got in, Weimann just grinned.

When you graduate, the agent told Weimann, maybe come work for the federal government. A few years later, after a stint as a private investigator, Weimann landed with the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Seattle. "I wanted to be near mountains," he recalls. Eventually, Portland became his base.

The switch from wildlife biology major to federal agent doesn't strike Weimann as much of a career change. In each instance, he was studying mammals, documenting evidence, and forming conclusions. Nor does he see a paradox with his youthful anti-authoritarian escapade. "I don't think I was antigovernment," he says. "Society would collapse without law enforcement. Law enforcement has never been a conflict for me."

In the course of his career, the fitness fanatic authored a martial arts book, *Warrior Speed*, and trained Oregon police on physical confrontations. He was a good cop, and INS detailed him to assignments with the Department of Justice, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and US Marshals Service, and Washington County's Gang Enforcement Team.

Weimann conducted hundreds of interrogations. He became attuned to the rhythms of the task, calibrating his own aggression against suspects' responses. Some approaches work for everyone; some take time to learn. Some are familiar tropes: the burly cop, screaming, red in the face. Weimann doesn't like that one.

"If you start off as an asshole," he says, "you can't become a nice guy later."

Some tactics trade on the suspect's values. In one case, for ex-

ample, Weimann faced off against a Korean man suspected of orchestrating an audacious scam to help thousands of illegal immigrants stay in the US by posing as farmworkers, thus qualifying for an amnesty program. The interrogation was going nowhere. Weimann finally turned to the translator and said this: "Translate everything I'm saying, just like I'm saying it." He sighed, and shook his head slowly, refusing to make eye contact with his subject. "I just don't understand how you can do it. I've treated you with honor and respect, and yet you ... you keep lying to me. How can you do that?"

The man sank into his chair, put his head in his hands, and confessed.

Weimann has another way, though. He offers a series of justifications for errant behavior until a suspect doesn't so much confess as simply agree with him.

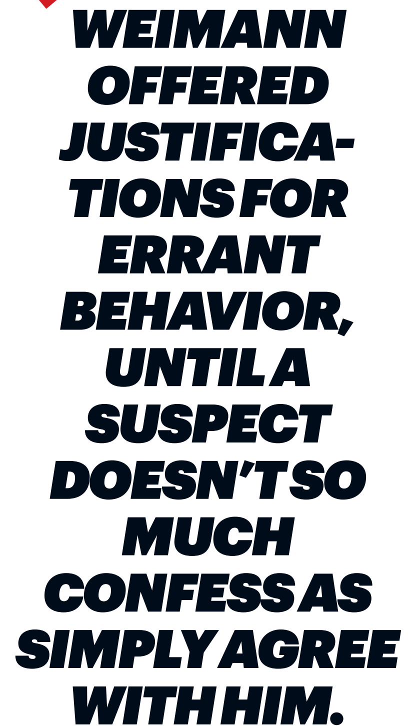
"You start with a smaller piece of it," he says. "Something easy."

THE UNITED STATES began to work with Bosnian prosecutors in the mid-2000s to find wanted war criminals. Records from all sides of the war survived, including a roster of the Zulfikar unit: dates of birth, fathers' names, details of military service. Investigators with ICE turned to Mike McQueen, a forensic historian, who threaded together profiles and ran them against possible matches in the US—a kind of rough inventory of suspects based only on birth names, aliases, and physical descriptions. By 2008, this process yielded an "unambiguous identification": the woman known as Zolja, Rasema Handanović, was living in Oregon, under a married name, with a child.

Parked outside Handanović's home—or, at that point, the home in which agents believed she lived—Weimann sat through hours of books on tape about physics and the cosmos, dark matter and the density of the universe. Watching, waiting.

He saw a man he believed was her boyfriend coming and going. The man had a history of firearm possession, he noted. He saw her father, who flew in from Austria, and her son. But on eight or nine stops of several hours, at different times of day, Weimann never saw Handanović herself. Finally, an agent working a separate shift spotted her.

The night before the raid, Weimann finalized his list of "justifications," the bait he'd use in his interrogation.



When the time came, he started with the broadest justification he could think of: she was a soldier, acting to protect other Muslims. Nothing. He tried to evoke an emotional reaction, saying that the shooting of her boyfriend triggered her actions. Again, nothing.

Weimann eased back in his chair. "Look at yourself," he said. "Look at your health. You are never going to get over this unless you accept your crimes." Sammy Yetisen, formery Handanović, alias Zolja, didn't move. She barely blinked, her wide eyes locked on his.

It was, for Weimann, unprecedented. Perhaps she suffered post-traumatic stress disorder. A lawyer would later assert that she was gang-raped by Serbs, half of her family killed. (The majority of the Bosnian war's victims were Muslims.) Or perhaps it was foresight, the understanding that the more she said, the worse off she would be.

Her silence lasted 20 minutes. "Her

lips never twitched, her fingers never twitched," Weimann recalls. Another Homeland Security investigations officer listened outside the door.

Weimann tried a last tactic, returning to something he asked her earlier. "We are talking about horrible crimes," he said. "Killing women and children. Don't you think about that?"

Finally, she spoke. "I didn't kill anybody," she said. "I want to speak with my lawyer."

Today, Weimann reflects on people he's interrogated—humanity's capacity for evil is neatly stacked in file folders in his mind. In each case, he says, he caught some flicker of recognition, some acknowledgment on the part of the accused that they had done wrong. He thought that would be true of everyone, until Zolja.

"If one of those explanations for her actions had triggered an emotional response, I don't think she could have hidden it," he says. "I have no problem ranking: she's by far the worst I ever encountered. You're always looking for tells, or signs. Stress. There were no visual signs of any kind. And there always are. I've done many interrogations, and that's the first time I've encountered none."

Handanović was extradited and charged in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Bosnian press treated her as a curiosity: the country's first conviction of a woman for war crimes. Despite her defiant performance in the Portland interrogation room, Handanović pleaded guilty to six killings.

"The court has taken into account that Handanović admitted the crimes ... and the fact that she expressed remorse to the relatives of the victims," Judge Jasmina Kosovic told the court, according to Reuters. After agreeing to testify against her Zulfikar accomplices, she pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five and a half years in prison. She is expected to be released in 2017, when she can appeal to return to the US. Her son, at last report, was living with his father in Canada.

These days, Weimann says he sometimes considers traveling to Bosnia, and seeing the knot of tiny houses where Rasema Handanović committed her crimes. But then he thinks perhaps he won't. What's there is dead and buried. The ghosts have nothing more to tell him.