

TIHOMIR BLAŠKIĆ

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Here we go. Our dictaphone in on. At the beginning of this recording I would like to ask you to introduce yourself. So, your name, surname, date and place of birth, place of residence and occupation?

My name is Tihomir Blaškić, I was born on the November 2nd, 2.11.1960. in Kiseljak, Kiseljak district, Bosnia and Herzegovina, I finished the Military Academy of the Land Army in Belgrade, in 1983 and I served as an active member of the armed forces in Ljubljana, in Pivica, in Postojna. Just before the beginning of the aggression on Croatia by the so called YPA (Yugoslavian People's Army), I left the army, on August 12th 1991, and went to Austria with my family, since my wife was born in Austria, I stayed there in Vienna. I joined the CDC (Croatian Defence Council) on the April 14th. Before that I was somewhere until April 2nd, imprisoned for ten days, in fact since.. Not since April 2nd but since April 3rd or I don't know, 4th, I was imprisoned by the so called Yugoslavian Army. They captured me in the place called Pod***. I was later moved to Dobojo, and then to Tuzla, where I was released during some kind of exchange, from 13th to 14th April, and then I reported to the Municipal...

the year, please.

Year 1992. And then I reported to the Municipal Headquarters of Kiseljak, where I assumed the post of the commanding officer of the armed forces of the Croatian Defence Council, and the Municipal Headquarters of Kiseljak, until June 1992, 27.6., when the president of the Croatian Community of Herceg-Bosna, Mate Boban, appointed me as the commanding officer of the Operation zone of central Bosnia, that included 22 districts or 22 municipal headquarters on the area of the central Bosnia. During the first few weeks the headquarters of my command was in Uskoplje or Gornji Vakuf, and after that, because of the development of the situation on the battlefield and better communication I moved the headquarters, with the approval of the Chief of the Main Headquarters, to Vitez, to the place of Kruščica, Vitez district, and somewhere in 11. month of 1992 I again moved the command from Kruščica to the hotel Vitez, and it was the command of the Operation zone of central Bosnia until the end of the period we are interested in, i.e. somewhere until the end of 1995, on April 26th 1994, after the Washington Agreement was signed, I was appointed as the second-in-command of the Chief of the Main Headquarters of the Croatian Defence Council, I received the rank of the major general and was moved to the position in the Main Headquarters which at that time was situated in Posušje. The same year, August 6th, I was appointed as the Chief of the Main Headquarters of the Croatian Defence Council, which also included the duties of the commanding officer, i.e. one of the commanding officers of the Joint Headquarters of the Army of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The other commanding officer was from the ranks of Muslim, Bosniak people, Mr. Rasim Delić. The two of us were in fact the commanding officers of that Joint Headquarters that was situated in Sarajevo. I remained on the duty of the Chief of the Main Headquarters of the Croatian Defence Council until the 1.12.1995, when I, because of the events and the charges that were brought against me in the meantime in November of 1995, I handed over the office to the general Živko Budimir. I was moved back, to the Croatian Army, and appointed as the inspector of the Croatian Army, and I held that office until April 1st of the year 96, when I went to Haag.

Formally I held that job, in the Ministry of Defence, until July 27th 2004, when I was retired according to the decision of the commander-in-chief and also the president of the Republic of Croatia, Stjepan Mesić. That would be the information about me. I am married, father of 3 children, the wife Ratka, was born in 1970 in the town of Kamferberg, in Austria. She finished the traffic-technical school, course of studies: traffic technician. We have three children: son Dean 17 years old, Ivan 9 years old and daughter Jelena 4 years old. We have been living in Zagreb since 1995. We live in an apartment that we bought on the market, and

before that we bought one apartment from the Ministry of Defence as all the other officers of the Ministry of Defence or the Croatian Army.

You said all of this nicely. Tihomir, I would like to ask you to return for a while to that war time. You say that on 14.4.1992, if I wrote down correctly, 14.4.1992 you became the commanding officer of the Operation zone of central Bosnia, is that right?

No, no, no on 27.6., and on 14.4. I arrived to Kiseljak.

So, since 27.6.1992.?

Yes, yes.

Now let's see...14.4. you say, you arrived to Kiseljak. What was the situation in Kiseljak? You have the experience, you had military schooling. What you find out in Kiseljak?

Well, I came because the Municipal Crisis Centre, formed by Croats and Muslims, called me. There were, I think, 9 members, and out of that 5 Croats and 4 Bosniak Muslims who together asked me, several times, to contact them and help them as a professional to prepare Kiseljak to defend itself from the aggression of what was then Yugoslavian Army but also from the Serbian army that also finished its mobilization. The district of Ravno already had been destroyed and there were already many conflicts with Yugoslavian Army which was becoming more and more Serbian and providing with arms the members of the Serbian nation in all the areas where they lived, whether as a majority, or as minority. In Kiseljak there was a garrison of that Yugoslavian Army. One artillery-missile battalion. The army was still there and functioned with a limited manoeuvre to move. So the people organized themselves through some village guards and with one passive resistance intended to prevent the Army from taking certain positions where that same people could serve them as targets. Especially in Kiseljak, since there was a huge quantity of artillery-missile weaponry. There were multiple rocket launchers, howitzer 122 and 152 mm and other weaponry that had a great fire power. The situation was quite chaotic. So there were some village guards. There were some 6, 7 military formations, and I will list only some.

Please.

For example, on one side there was the Croatian Defence Council that didn't have any particular organization. It was actually organized by villages, by local communities, where the individual local communities chose their commanding officers. In fact, the ones that could either secure weaponry and logistics, or were the most prominent people in those villages, and it was equally patterned among Muslims and Serbs in Kiseljak, while the Serbs drifted towards Ilidža and were supported by the villages that again drifted towards Ilidža, the neighbouring district of Kiseljak. So, every village had its own commanding officers. In addition, there were numerous groups that were self proclaimed military formations, like for example some members of some Handžar division, then some Devils division. Then there were members of the Patriotic league. There were members of Territorial Defence. Then there were, I don't know, the members of Ilija's unit or,, - and so on. In one word, there was a real chaos and somehow, a certain lack of purpose was felt in the air. Actually, the people who lived for years under the torture of centralism and the expectation that all the solutions have to come from the above, suddenly found themselves in the situation where they had to take care of themselves - this lack of purpose was felt, an utterly absurd situation where at one point not even the stores were open. You could walk around with a huge amount of money and could legally buy hardly anything. When I say legally, then I think about some kind of store; buy, I don't know, one kilogram of fruit or something else. While the same things could have been bought from hucksters, black marketers etc. Probably the most profitable trade at the time was the one involving evacuation, either from Sarajevo or other areas, of certain civilians which were done probably by some kind of half-wild taxi drivers. In one word, one completely, completely chaotic situation of anarchy, disorder. Police was also one mobilised,

the other isolated. The members of the Serbian nation who were in the police, some of them left the police and moved out towards Ilidža. Some stayed here. The weapons were out of control almost in every village and there were no lists, there wasn't any kind of structure, and what was in all of that...

How did people get the weapons?

On all possible ways. So, either by buying it off from the army – it was done legally, to offer the soldiers a certain amount of money, or to the military superiors who were in the Kiseljak garrison for certain..., and some kind of price list was already established there, for the repurchase of weaponry; or to offer to the soldier to run away from the army in exchange for the weapons and to help him with it. Parties were also building up arms. But when I came to Kiseljak, as I understand, there were no more than some 50 up to maximally one hundred guns which arrived either from PDA (Party of Democratic Action), or CDU (Croatian Democratic Union). Some weird euphoria prevailed. Some people sold, I personally know some farmers that had to sell a calf or a cow to buy a gun from those private hucksters, or they did it because they believed... Actually, there was a lot of desolation among the people, a certain fear, certain anxiety. Actually they also thought that, by buying that gun, they will solve the question of safety for themselves and their family. And simply slowly became convinced that the quantity of safety in some area, where they live, depends on whether they have or don't have weaponry. They thought if they buy a gun for themselves they have secured their safety, and the safety of their family, and then they sold absolutely everything. Of course that "black market" flourished here and those weapons were bought. The people simply grew attached to their weapons. Some were even composing songs. Song »Moj Kalašnjikov« was a hit in Kiseljak, I don't know, I don't remember, the song "My trench" etc...

My trench?

Yes. Let's say those were the songs that were. I don't know, the song "Berta and ****", I also remember that song. This one was even set to music. You even have it on tape somewhere. It really was, it was in the area of Travnik where they were sung – because the village was identified with Nora, for example, who was unnecessary to that village according to the military way of thinking. So that is... weapons were acquired in all possible ways, and it was really one half-crazy situation to sell everything for that gun. One didn't even ask about the quality of it, how much it can serve its purpose. That wasn't even taken into account. The important thing was that one had a weapon. I remember that almost all well-to-do people in Kiseljak, like entrepreneurs or owners of some catering establishments had sniper rifles. Now whether he knows or doesn't know how to use that sniper – that didn't matter. But there was some kind of list of at least 15 people, I know 5 by name, who had snipers and who – I'm sure had no idea how to use them. Not even adjust them, do the rectification of the rifle scope on them or simply make them function. But they had them. So that was the situation of a chaos which I found and...

Fine, now we talked about the weapons. Did any kind of defined positions exist, dug in trenches, something...?

No, no! There was absolutely nothing. Only one guard post, well... What was actually going on? The farmers used the classical logic: since there were barracks in Kiseljak and they had their guard posts, then the farmers set their own guard posts opposite of those guards. It was the only thing that existed. However, at the entrance of every village there was, let's say, some kind of half-military guard, there was some kind of list made by the leader of that village and well... when I say leader I mean commander of the village – and of course, that commander of the village unless he could not satisfy the appetite of the village in the sense of

the quantity of weaponry, in the sense of the quantity of the ammunition or if another person appeared who could satisfy those appetites better, they would simply replace him. Now they would appoint him themselves... it wasn't Marko anymore but Jure, because Jure, besides guns, offered the farmers 50 kg of flour, and 5 bullets more than Pero did. And now he is the commander. So, it didn't matter whether Jure or Marko, that commander of the village, completed his military service, if he passed the military service, the training or not, he became the commander and so called boss who regulated the life in this area, in that village. When I say life, I mean the freedom of movement, the decision who can enter the village, when and how the guards will be put within the village. And nobody spoke about taking those military positions that were important for the defence of the whole place. There wasn't even one. There was only one control point on the main road Sarajevo – Kiseljak, in the place called Kobiljača. That's one pass and there was one point made out of two tractor tires, two metal barrels, some two barrels put on the side of the road. And there was another tractor tire on the road that even endangered the safety, without any kind of markings. There you would find some soldiers during the day keeping guard – by whose schedule?, for whose interests?, who put them there? And there were no military positions. That is, there were no classic defence lines. Not even one. So, there was no fortification, entrenchment, because it wasn't in. At that time the popular thing was to demonstrate – parade, buy a uniform and show yourself in the uniform, this was more important than to take your most elegant suit and walk around Kiseljak. The same situation was in Busovača and other places. All of this was weird to me, especially because I lived outside of Kiseljak since I was 14 years old. I wasn't there, I lived in Slovenia and served in the ex-YPA. I would come to Kiseljak only for 15 or 20 days of rest. I then myself was shocked by that sudden militarization. Even small children, only few years old, had uniforms..., my son also had his uniform although he was not even 4 years old, this was the kind of clothes that all other children wore. No matter if they had jeans and trainers below and the jacket above. It was important to have some piece of military uniform and to wear it. On the other hand, what was special, when I arrived – what was the cause of great concern, was that everybody tried to destroy all existing military records. So those Unit records that held the basic information about every draft-eligible person, whether he served in the army or not, whether he was trained, if he had some speciality in the army or not. They did this to avoid sending recruits to the ex-YPA and in some way avoid recruiting in '91. They simply removed the records from the Military offices any way they could. Because if those military records existed and were available, it would be possible to take those records and use them for building up arms or equipment of men and so on. In one word it was a total chaos. And what's the worst thing in all of this, the few people who understood the military logic and who worked in those ex-Departments of National Defence knew, in fact, two concepts made by the ex-Yugoslavian army. One was the aggression by the NATO, and the other the aggression by the Warsaw Agreement. So, let's say, by all the plans that existed at the time, in the case of aggression and immediate war, Kiseljak should retreat towards Ilidža, and in Ilidža there was a concentration, huge concentration of the army of Republic Srpska and Yugoslavian Army. Ilidža was for a long time, until the Dayton Agreement was signed, one of the biggest districts of the then so called Republic Srpska. So, it was the district that had the biggest number of people but also military potential. And now it turned out that, using reports and plans in case of war or immediate danger which were valid now, the whole Kiseljak should be evacuated towards Ilidža, and basically go into the hands of their war enemy. Let's say it was like that... And not even to mention that the communication was more or less reduced to some telephone lines which were all more or less wiretapped by the military authorities of the Serbian Army. And I know that the phone number in Kiseljak, in the barracks, so after they were abandoned by the so called YA, stayed the same. So, not even

the number was changed, and that is more or less that situation in Kiseljak, without even one arranged military position.

And this is the situation that you found there?

Yes, the one I found in Kiseljak,

Right, and what does a person when he comes and finds such a situation, and wants to change something – what does one have to do? Where to start?

Well, it was very difficult. Any kind of formal authority, or some commanding position, or anything else meant nothing to those farmers. Let's say, I got, when I became that commanding officer, I gave myself a task to go literally from village to village, do missionary work – I called it missionary work – to go from village to village, to try to talk to local people and try to lead every village to a position – line of defence. Of course, having in mind that our biggest danger, the only dangers is the Yugoslavian Army and the Army of the Republic Srpska as it called itself later.. So, the Serbian Army. First I tried to motivate the villages that were very close to the potential line of conflict to come out to those positions and to start arranging those positions for the defence. So, to make the locals really understand on their own that they are in some way first, that they are the first target of the potential attacker, and those were the border villages of the district of Kiseljak that bordered Ilidža. I don't know, it was the local community Lepenica, local community Bmjaci. And this depended on the personal will that the farmers had, how much they wanted to listen to me...

So, what? The first thing you actually had to do was make contact with those local leaders...

Absolutely, yes. Make them agree and convince them – as much as it was in my power to convince them that it is necessary to do something...

How did you address them? You would order, or....?

No, there are no orders here.

So what would you do then to make them listen?

Literally it was convincing, so to inform the people that I will come to some villages, and that I have some military or professional qualifications, that I can help them. And then I would go to that village and try to get the locals to go out to the positions and posts, those military elevations, those hills that would be suitable for our defence. To show them out there how would the potential attacker, or then how would the Serbs attack, and then ask them to start digging trenches, digging some kind of shelters, bunkers. Some wanted to, some didn't. **And what did you do when they didn't want to?**

When they didn't want to I came again the next day, and tried to let them know that this is for them, for their families. Simply I continued to convince them verbally. So, like some kind of politician in some kind of, some kind of campaign. I actually did those campaigns to convince them. And sometimes I would, in some local community ask that the members of their families come to those meetings, so that I can go to that side too, to say: you are not digging those trenches for me, I am not important here, you are digging to protect your children, your wives. Sometimes I changed things, to make some shelter a lot closer to the village than it would be in some real conditions – just to make a compromise, to convince those people they should come out, they should dig, they should make those fortifications. But I believed that a huge gain was already the fact that I managed to take those people to their positions, and usually would go village to village. One day, one village. That would be, I don't know, maybe maximally two kilometres during the day to check those positions, they would go with me, "Marko your position is by that tree, Janko yours is here, Pero yours is here", and so on, and then, if they want – they will dig, if they don't want to – they won't. I didn't have any mechanisms, I didn't have any power of force over them. The truth is, there were some beginnings of military police, but in Kiseljak there were, I think, 12 military policemen, and if they came to some village where there were 30 such farmers – well they would chase them

away with hoes. Not even to mention that here again, that those were the policemen from those villages. I can not expect from the military policemen to go against his father, to force his father, brother, cousin to dig and so on, and not even that immediate danger – since it wasn't there at the moment, since they didn't hear shots above Kiseljak, didn't hear the fire being opened, then it didn't mean anything to them. They even said: "Well fine, if necessary we will dig, but if not we will not dig." So there were many problems there, there were also many problems with the division of weaponry which was almost impossible. Because that military pyramid that functioned from the top towards the bottom now functioned from the bottom towards the top. Now you couldn't command,.. Let's say, there were some absurd situations that a man served the army as the operator, let's say, on a tank, or here was part of the tank crew. Now he took, I don't know, bought for himself, had some money and bought some kind of machine-gun. And he doesn't even know how to take it apart or put it together, nor use it, nothing. But he bought it, he gave the means for it. You didn't even have a way to tell him "Listen, that machine-gun should go to your first neighbour Pero, or Luka, because they are trained, and you are not". It was very difficult, so that I decided to train them. I said: "Ok! This is your weapon, but allow me, come one day and let us show you how to use it in the most efficient way". The Yugoslavian Army left Kiseljak on the April 23rd '92. Some negotiations were lead with the commander of the barracks. At the beginning the commander of the garrison was the lieutenant-colonel Mustafa Polutak. He came as the commanding officer of the garrison of the Yugoslavian Army to the negotiations with the Municipal Crisis Centre of the district of Kiseljak and with us, the commanding officers, and the day when the army should have left Kiseljak the colonel Ljuban Kosovac came. Ljuban Kosovac relieved Mustafa Polutak of his duty and he actually took this whole garrison out of Kiseljak. They passed by undisturbed. They took with them the equipment they thought they should take. Then those barracks went to municipal headquarters Kiseljak, i.e. Croatian Defence Council. As I said it was a very, very difficult situation and then we organized some kind of training. Since we could not do it in villages, we found one place in the immediate proximity of the barracks where we intended to do with all those farmers at least the basic training in handling those personal weapons, and more or less train them how to point their rifle and aim, although that was very, very difficult. Mostly we managed to convince the people of how much they don't know, and not how much they know, that they should pass something – because that farmer would react differently after firing two shots and looking at his target and realizing that he didn't make it, that there are no hits on the target. So, it was a situation when you should prepare the ground as if the attack will happen tomorrow. Choose those positions, make the rounds with farmers and all the rest, when I was afraid that I won't even have time visit it all, and even less to arrange. And another situation was where I had to work with those people who had weapons, and to arrange them into some military or half-military formations, and I alone went from village to village, than made every village into a platoon, no matter if they all didn't have guns. But when the relief was on I went to convince them that the weapons should be shared, although it was difficult, very difficult. And we always had some who opposed this, so later we constituted those villages as companies. And later the villages became some kind of battalions. But it was always some kind of combination of military, village formations. Those were more some kind of village militias, village guards, and less some kind of classic military formations. There were almost no instructions.

Did you have some kind of team of people that you could lean on during that enlightenment campaign?

Well there were, there were some...

How many people were actually around you that did that job?

Yes, it was in the villages, those leaders... there was again a weird situation in Kiseljak.

Those were mostly all of those, we called them interns, so the people who served the military

and had some elementary military knowledge. Formally, on paper they even had high ranks like captain, major – but in fact, they were not active military officers. Those were mostly people in reserve task force. And there was one second lieutenant, member of the ex-Yugoslavian People's Army, there was another captain with me. Those are two, but they joined somewhere at the end of April. And there were also several captains from the rows of Muslim-Bosniak people, when that army left the garrison. And there was that Mr. Mustafa Polutak, who actually agreed only at the beginning.,,,

He stayed?

He stayed here, but he expected that he will immediately be appointed as the main commanding officer, which was absurd because until yesterday he was the member of the Yugoslavian Army. And now he expected to be promoted by the Municipal Crisis Centre for the main commanding officer of all the armed forces, which would in such a situation and line-up of all the relationships mean that also that crisis centre, probably that armed mob would eliminate and change not only him. So many manoeuvres were necessary there. There were maybe three, not maybe but only three collaborators from the rows of the Croatian nation, and three from the rows of Muslim-Bosniak nation and...

Who you could rely on?

Yes, if we worked together. For a while, together, the commanding officers of that Joint Command were Bakir Alispahic and I. He commanded the Patriotic League and coordinated the work of TD.... Mostly we visited places together. He mostly commanded the units of the Territorial Defence and the Patriotic League. The Patriotic League had its own armed formations together with the CDC in the barracks. They had part of the premises in the barracks.,,

And it functioned in this way?

It functioned in some places... The first points of disagreement were when the command started coming from what was then the Main Command Headquarters in Sarajevo for us to break the blockade of Sarajevo. I mean, they were half-crazy...,

When was that?

That was... the first commands started coming somewhere in May of '92.

Already then?

Already then, yes, and those orders came by the simple fax machine, a civil phone line, and it was absurd that, for example, before the order came from that command, they called from the Yugoslavian Army and Serbian side.,. One time they called me on the phone and said: "Now you will receive the order to attack us so be careful to receive that order", and so on. And then we receive, and then they say: "You should receive, you still didn't get the second page". We really get the order saying to break the blockade of Sarajevo. I mean, that was crazy.

However, there were different approaches: the members of the Territorial Defence from the rows of the Muslim-Bosniak people obeyed the order twice and they had terrible loses. Although they knew themselves that the order was, so to say, invaded and that it is known, and so on. But those were some points of disagreement, it turned out later, like: we want to break the blockade of Sarajevo, but CDC doesn't. The Croats doesn't...

It was interpreted in this way?

Yes, it was shown to the public in this way, and nobody said that those were crazy orders. Because, we all want to break the blockade, but have no means to do it! It doesn't exist, we don't have the military possibility,,, we didn't even have the basic elementary conditions necessary to do so. For example, at the time when those orders came, the whole Kiseljak – from the viewpoint of the Croatian people – didn't have more than 130 maybe, 140 guns.

And the orders come from Sarajevo to break the blockade?

Yes, to attack the Serbs, to break the blockade of Sarajevo, to enter from Kiseljak over, I don't know, Blažuj, Ilidža towards Sarajevo, which is a huge task even for two corps and one

division. Because it's 30 kilometres of depth. Those are three days of division fighting. If one division can progress some 10 kilometres, this is some kind of average in military thinking. And we here got one division task, the group of maybe 200 people received it – people who got their gun in one way or the other, who never functioned as some kind of military unit or military formation, and of course, that caused the disagreement, although we shared the information and said that everybody knows about the action, it is known, that the attack is expected, that even the Serbs who were our enemies at the time called us from their positions “come on, when will you finally move so we can kill you”. It happened twice that those actions resulted with great losses and for which no one ever was made responsible. In the end, and in '95 the Army of the Republic Bosnia and Herzegovina and CDC tried with joint forces to break the blockade of Sarajevo, but we didn't make it. We used almost all our potentials and failed to break the blockade of Sarajevo. In '95, when we were already organized as well as the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we tried to do it but again we failed. So this only shows how complicated and demanding was this military operation, and unjustified in the autumn of 1992.

Fine, so we are now moving through 1992, is that right?

Yes.

What you were talking about, that is the April of '92. That is the situation you found in Kiseljak. There are already problems in May, those orders come from Sarajevo. Is that right?

Yes, yes.

What happened then? In June, July, August?

Well some conflicts occurred later. Those small, so to say brushes, conflicts occurred.

On 27.6. you move, get,..?

Yes, in Kiseljak the situation stayed more or less the same, so that some three armed formations existed. On one side there was the Croatian Defence Council which collaborated with the Territorial Defence and Patriotic League. The displaced persons arrived who already came from Ilidža, exiled Muslims arrived. We accommodated them all in the hotel, in “Dalmacija”. The only hotel that existed in Kiseljak, and they were fed in...

The hotel is called “Datmacija”?

Dalmacija is the name of the hotel, yes. They were fed in the barracks. Also the first groups of some armed formations arrived. One was led by the lieutenant-colonel Mustafa Porobić, who arrived with one Croatian-Muslim brigade. Those were mostly displaced persons from Derventa and some volunteers who tried, also, at their own discretion to break into Sarajevo. There were some small brushes, but more or less that June ended. I was reassigned for the commanding officer of the Central Bosnia, with the headquarters in Gornji Vakuf. And then, the situation I found in Kiseljak actually doubled – so that now I had problems, not only in one district, but in 22 districts. Besides I was already responsible for those front-lines that were active. This front-line was then already active, first around the district of Teslić, above. So, Teslić, Tešanj, Žepče. The place is called Komušina. That was the area that Serbs captured, and expelled from that area the Croats, from Komušina, somewhere at the beginning of 8/92. And then the district of Jajce had its turn, which was also strategically important for the Serbs – among other things because of the hydro-electric plants. In the area of those districts there are two hydro-electric plants which provide electrical energy for the complete Krajina, and above all Banja Luka, Prijedor and other cities, and they were very interesting for the Serbs in their conquest of the remaining parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Then there was the front-line in Stup. So, from Sarajevo towards Stup and Ilidža where the Serbs also intended to capture that area and exile the Croats from that area, the front-line in the eastern part, Olovo, Olovo, which was important for the Serbs in order to solve their corridors towards eastern

Bosnia. Those are mostly some, actually, now front-lines that are becoming active, and on the other hand, I somehow tried to organize together with those municipal headquarters those military formations which could do those tasks. Because the winter was coming, and the happenings on the front made it obvious that the Serbs would not stop, that they would take all they could. I tried to organize the defence, above all in the district of Jajce, and then also Olovo, and that Stup – although I was aware that we will not be able to defend some positions like for example Stup because it was repeatedly surrounded by Serbs. After I saw that Serbs their main potentials, complete resources that they had on their disposal, from the task force of the First Corps which at the time made around 60% of the Serbian army, with the headquarters in Banja Luka; and this Second Corps with the headquarters in Drvar, were aiming to attack Jajce with the intention to capture it – I mainly focused there and all the activities were intended to help the defenders of Jajce, to try to defend that area. I was aware that if we fail next will be Travnik and complete central Bosnia, and Serbs from the area of Sarajevo and from the area of Banja Luka will unite and capture a bigger part of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Then I personally, already at the beginning of August, went to the district of Jajce and stayed there for a few days. I met with all of the commanders. So with those the local and territorial defence, and presidents of PDA, presidents of CDU, the church prelates. So, church leaders, Moslem priests, respected farmers from that area and citizens from the area of the district of Jajce. I visited this whole municipality and I tried again, as much as I could, because the situation was the same, to regroup the weaponry a bit and reorganize the whole deployment of the army in order to, in some way, stop the Serbian conquest, and we were mostly successful. However, the Serbs really attacked the town with all their forces. So with helicopters, aeroplanes, artillery, everything attacked, and they didn't choose the targets: starting from the hospital which was being destroyed, to all other buildings, either religious, or the buildings important from the provisions, for the life of those people and citizens of Jajce. Under those circumstances, under the impression of uncertainty and survival of the defenders of Jajce I went to a meeting I was invited to Herzegovina, somewhere at the beginning of September. And then, under those circumstances, I met and encountered general Praljak.

So, we are talking about September?

Yes, august has finished....

Which year?

1992. August mostly finished –

September of '92?

I arrived then with the intention to visit the Main Headquarters, which was situated in Grude. The Chief of the Main Headquarters at the time was brigadier Petković. And to ask him for help for the defenders of Jajce. Above all, this material help. So, in ammunition, munitions, weaponry and, of course, food and other military equipment. And I didn't even ask for help in manpower because I know there was no military formation that he could at the time, because of the general disorganization, send to the defenders of Jajce. I noted that one of my co-workers told me I should go to Međugorje to some kind of meeting, although I had no idea what kind of meeting it was. I remember well I was late. I think it should have been somewhere around 12 o'clock, and I arrived to Međugorje from Grude, I don't know, around half past twelve, one o'clock. Here I noticed a huge crowd in one room. We were going to the ground floor, it was some kind of building. I noticed there was a big crowd and that many commanding officers were present. I knew some of them, some I've never even met. It was my first time. And I heard one person talking very loud, he was very noisy. This was my first impression that the person was in some way in charge here. That he had some kind of post. I didn't see any emblems. When I entered the room I saw a man, very tall, with beard. Today I know it was general Praljak. He was talking very loudly, and as loud as he was talking that

much he constantly gesticulated with his hands. He was explaining that..., more or less were his theories, as far as I can remember, some I even noted down, that there is no agreement or consensus around the future political solution between the representatives of the Croatian-Muslim and Serbian nation, and that an immediate agreement between Croats and Muslim Bosniaks is necessary regarding the defence from the Serbian aggression, that it would simplify the defence itself as well as the organization and structure of the army.

So, that's what was talked about that day, that time?

That time, I heard. It was very, like this,, He had no concept. He just stated some of his personal impressions and his perception of the solution. Several times he stressed that the war will be actually won by the side that withstands longer, wanting to motivate us to insist in our efforts. I remember well that he said that we all know more or less what we are missing, but that it is necessary to prepare for one long-term and very demanding war. He literally said: "for one necessary and very demanding effort that is in front of us". I remember that, and he repeated several times that the battles are won by those who are prepared to go till the end. And that as commanding officers we have to subordinate all our abilities to the soldier. Actually that nobody will present us with nor formally give us that authority over the soldier and that we have to earn it. He stressed that several times that actually that commanding power over the soldiers must and has to be earned. That we have to be prepared for that sacrifice, to that self-sacrifice. Mainly he didn't leave place for questions. He also said that we have to ensure the maximum conditions for the stay of the soldiers on the front-line, but that everybody can't have the same conditions nor can they be unified, at least not now at the beginning. And he also said that we simply have to teach ourselves to see what we have created until now, and not only to see what we are missing in the given situation. Mostly it was a monologue. Later he asked of all regional commanding officers... I had the impression that he didn't even know all those regional commanding officers because there were too many of them, but he asked to state in short the situation, not so that he can solve it... I had the impression that maybe on the meeting one could see if someone can somehow help. For example, the central Bosnia had those factories, factories of explosives, weaponry, Herzegovina on the other hand had footwear factories. So now, if something can be done here, to compensate the footwear for something else. Or maybe just to familiarize the commanding officers with problems, here, in this region. Those were mostly commanding officers from CDC. But as far as I can remember, there was one participant, Muslim Bosniak. But he was a member of the CDC, because I've seen him before in the Main Headquarters. I don't know what his duty was. He did something on the executive level of the Main Headquarters. Here I mostly stated.-. Actually I realised: great, there is my chance to present the problem of the town Jajce and the defenders of Jajce. I talked to Praljak, but also intended to get the others to listen. I said that in the central Bosnia the defenders of Jajce need help the most, that this is the area that is burning now – and if Jajce fell, Travnik would be next and then the other areas of central Bosnia. And Praljak asked me if Petković new, he literally said: "Is Petković aware of the situation?" I said that he does know but that he told me himself that he simply has no way to help me. That he doesn't have this ammunition I need. And that he won't be able to help me. Than he said, here, on the meeting: "Well there has to be some solution. Is there anybody here who can find a solution, who can help? Everybody should give one box of ammunition and here are ten boxes for the commanding officer." He didn't even know my name at the time. We didn't even communicate. And he said once again, stressed, that we have to do everything to prevent any area from falling. Simply, it can't happen that because of the lack of ammunition, or some equipment, we loose certain areas because we would bleed in order to get them back. My first impression of him was... and on that meeting he tried to leave us with the impression that there are no hopeless situations. That there are no situations that can not be solved with an additional amount of energy, and he emphasized that

we have to be leaders of that faith, even when it seems utterly pointless. The faith that there is a solution. That we will fight for that solution.

How did it look to you then? How did those words by Praljak sound in your ears then?

I was happy that I can finally talk with someone who obviously – although maybe then I could not test the knowledge of military or professional-military problems – that there obviously is someone one can rely on. Above all that they will understand him and, on the other hand, someone who is really capable to animate people, who is able to pull them from that apathy and lead those people, so someone who will not only tell those people what to do, but also lead them while they do it, and really, every word I heard, was mostly oriented on the fact that we simply can not give up the fight. That we have to find the solution and a way to defend ourselves of the forthcoming Serbian aggression. There was one enemy, and he also emphasized on that meeting that we have to look for allies everywhere, anywhere where we can find them and in all structures. Of course including the Territorial Defence and the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Were the representatives of the Territorial Defence present at the time?

I haven't seen them. I came to the meeting late, I have no idea if there was some kind of list of people present at the meeting or not. I arrived at the second half, that meeting somehow, as far as I could see, was in the full swing and that was my first time in Međugorje, this was the first time I met most of those commanding officers and it was all new to me. But I noted down some of the detail and as I said, I remember those words I mentioned a moment ago. And he left an impression of one of the officers ready to face all the difficulties, and who is personally ready to take on a burden where necessary.

After that, when was your next encounter?

After that, that agony regarding the help and defence of Jajce continued. The help was doled out. That relationship didn't change much. I mostly spend my time trying to send from central Bosnia every week some two hundred soldiers who would help the defenders of Jajce. And I somehow managed to organize this approach to go in shifts and defend Jajce. And then somewhere around the 19th I got a sudden call to report to...

19th? Of which month?

19.10.'92, to report to the minister of defence Bruno Stojić, at 10 o'clock. To report on the 20th, so, on the 19th I got the call to report on 20.10., at 10 o'clock. At the time one would travel a lot longer to Mostar, you would use these mountain ways, over the Vran Mountain or over the Ivan Sedlo. So, or you would go through the valley of the river Neretva, or over the Vran Mountain and Prozor. I arrived then around 10 o'clock, on 20.10., to Mostar and there I met Praljak again. I also met Bruno Stojić, I met Jelavić and the other high-ranking officials. Mostly the conversation was about the same problems. So, the subject was the defence of Jajce, how to help the defenders, how to transport this ammunition? It was indicated already then that there is a bit more weaponry, ammunition. My problem was huge at the time: how to evacuate the wounded, the children and the ill from the town itself? Because we didn't have safe communication, and I heard, I was informed, that there is some kind of armoured bus. Some kind of bus that the repairmen prepared and covered with additional metal sheets, that would give certain protection to the seriously wounded who we weren't able to evacuate. And in fact, we talked about that, and I was promised to get that bus. But,,,

Who promised you that?

Ante Jelavić promised that in Grude, and also Bruno Stojić promised. And I did, then we talked like this, it wasn't on the meeting anymore. Like, well, we have the electric power plants under our control, in the worst case. If the evacuation of the wounded is not permitted – because they controlled on part of the road even with infantry-weaponry, near Turbet, so Karaula – Turbet, so one move... There were roads controlled by the Serbs, even with infantry-weaponry. At any point they could either hit the bus, or the bus driver, or choose who

to shoot. That was so near, and at one point, I wasn't sure but I think, that it's here... I'm not 100% sure that Praljak said "no matter what, we can't use electricity and water to blackmail the Serbs". In the sense that we can't turn off the electricity, and then as the condition to turn it on again ask them to release the wounded etc. But, I'm sure that this theory was there, that we can not use the blackmail as such to rescue the wounded.

Praljak said those words?

He was on that meeting. There were three of us. Now I say, I believe it was him. But, maybe I should check it in my notes. But that the electricity and the water, so, that the electricity in Banja Luka and the rest of the region should not be turned off in order to blackmail the Serbs to release the wounded, and after that the situation worsened because a conflict broke out in central Bosnia. Exactly on that day, with the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the village of Ahmići. That is that conflict on 20.10. That conflict broke out in Novi Travnik. So that not even the help that was sent, including one special unit of DDF (Croatian Defence Forces) lead by the General of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ante Prkačin, that unit was called "The Bosnian Dragon" and I think it consisted of some two hundred trained soldiers that were supposed to help the defenders of Jajce. They didn't pass because on the way from Bugojno towards Novi Travnik they were returned by the members of Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Apparently they didn't have the correct papers, they didn't have the correct permits. And the other unit, so, one unit was returned from the area Bugojno – Novi Travnik, and the other unit was returned that same day from the direction of Busovača and Kiseljak, which also went to help the defenders of Jajce. This one was stopped in Ahmići. One was stopped in Rostovo, and the other in Ahmići, and none of those two units of members, the ones that were willing to help the defenders of Jajce, didn't get there. Anyway, the situation here became worse. The convoys that we planned didn't get through, and the conflict in the central Bosnia additionally influenced the defenders who were from Novi Travnik and Vitez and were at the front-line in Jajce to leave those front-lines. Because, among other things, the positions of CDC in Novi Travnik and also in Vitez were attacked. And then a general confusion occurred, and at the end of October Jajce fell. And now, as we supposed, it was Travnik's turn, and there was also a very complex situation here, we had numerous refugees from Jajce, one and the other, so Croats and Muslims which were... That was one immense line, some ten thousand people who were all mixed up. So civilians and soldiers who arrived to Travnik. For some Travnik was just a temporary stop. There were some four to five thousand small arms which were resold. Travnik became one market-hall for the black market. And at the same time it was Travnik's turn as the next town Serbs were supposed to capture. They even appointed their mayor for the neighbouring district, Turbe, and predicted in their plans that they will capture Travnik by the end of 11. month. Somewhere at the same time, either in October or November, there were some prepared talks about the new round of the Geneva negotiations, so Mladić personally said on one meeting – I think it was with Petković, or someone – that it is only matter of days when they'll capture Travnik. And already previous to that the town was completely surrounded. We only had one route from Vitez, only one communication from the east where we could enter that town. All the rest, all the hills around it were more or less under the control of the Serbs, and under those circumstances somehow one general belief prevailed about the need for united defence with Muslim Bosniaks and a joint command was created, somewhere after this conflict on 20.10.92. So, probably around the 23rd or 24th, and previous to that there was a meeting with the very top of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 23.10.92. in Sarajevo. I was part of that delegation of CDC that visited, in the building of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Muslim-Bosniak top, lead at the time by Ejup Ganić. There was also Sefer Halilović, then also Šiber and... and the meeting and the talks were presided by general Morion. Those were again those *** talks where it was our BH preparation of one united platform for the

appearance on the meeting that included the Serbs. But here we talked about the need to unite, to try to defend Travnik together and to stop the Serbs in front of Travnik. And now, in such a situation where the wounds for the conflict on 20.10. in Novi Travnik were only healing, and where we tried to organize the joint command for the defence of Travnik, general Praljak came for the second time, actually came for the first time to visit Travnik ...

He came for the first or the second time?

As far as I can remember it was the first time, so the first time. That was somewhere, let's say, from 10th to the 15.11.92. Yes, in '92. The situation was chaotic. Every day there were numerous displaced persons here. Simply so many newcomers that Travnik as a town could not accept. That was a huge burden for the local leadership, the Serbs of course knew that the displaced persons, so many displaced persons from Jajce will make problems for us. There were, I don't know, tens of thousands of people. From those surely four, five thousand were armed, and then they continued sending displaced persons from Kotor Varoš, in that period. And then from Banja Luka, mostly, displaced persons came from Krajina almost daily, and besides that they of course made the military pressure on the city itself to capture it. We were in a desperate situation, including that a huge part of the military command wasn't aware of the gravity of this position. General Praljak together with me was in a difficult situation himself, and found such a situation and I will give only a few examples.

The president of the district of Travnik said that he first has to be paid for the job on determining, so on realization of engineering works for the defence of Travnik. So, he asks first for his payment slip to be filled out, to make the payment for the works and then he will fortify the town where he is mayor. Let's say that's absurd. Or, another case was when the vice-president of the CDU asked to get my consent, asked me to write him another letter of support, and he will go and make the preparations for the defence of Travnik. I thought that he will visit the villages of Travnik and I asked him: "Well then, why do you need my letter? Every farmer here knows you better than me. My name doesn't mean anything in Travnik because nobody knows me in Travnik." A he told me than that he wants that letter to go to Split and from there make the preparations for the defence of Travnik. Then Praljak lost his temper seeing all this crazy behaviour. He kicked that Pero, we call him, we called him Pero, Klempo, I can't remember the surname now, in the behind and threw him out. However, that was the only shocking situation...

That was the reaction of Praljak?

Yes, his reaction to that. First he also tried to convince him that this was crazy, that it wouldn't be even good for the defenders, if the leaders of the civil and party leadership start leaving the town that it will create an avalanche of those leaving the town. Although a big part already escaped. And that it shouldn't be done this way, especially not the ones that have to take care of the entrenching of the defenders, of the civil works in the war being done, of preparation of the medical supplies, the preparation of the places that will receive the wounded, sick and so on. However, he still insisted that he is the civilian authority, that he has the supreme power and that he is not interested in that, and that he will leave town anyway to make the preparations in Split. And then Praljak kicked him in the behind, shouted at him in his own style, that was the shock effect for the others, so they joined to do at least those jobs that are necessary in such a situation. It's enough to say that, for example, in Travnik the three or four day's old cattle killed by shelling used to lay in the streets and nobody would remove it, because simply civil services... the service of civil protection that would do the sanitization of that grounds didn't work at all, neither did the other services, and we didn't have enough soldiers to make them do that. Sometimes we didn't even know, and the town-inhabitants or citizens would call us and tell us it exists, and that someone should come and remove it from the town. As I said it was a chaotic situation. However, despite the situation, Praljak never allowed us even to think about the fall, about the loss. As if we haven't lost anything, as if we

were equal, as if we also had tanks. We actually didn't have a single tank, and against us we had armoured and artillery forces of the Serbs who now, when they reduced the front-line... Because Jajce had some 40 and something kilometres of circular defence, maybe even more. And now that union was reduced, so that they freed huge military forces for the attack of Travnik. Never did he allow us to think about that defeat and he did everything so that we would constantly stay in touch with the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to connect not only on the commanding level – where it is the easiest to connect all your potentials for the united defence – but also on this level, on the posts. I know personally that he visited the posts, that he personally visited the commanding officer Refik Lenda in Novi Travnik, who was the least partial to that cooperation, and that he kept encouraging him to get involved because at the time in Novi Travnik the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina didn't hold not even a meter of front-line towards Serbs. It had some bases behind the first front-line and mainly focused on Croatian areas. That was the reason of our conflict. However, general Praljak even went to the headquarters of the Joint Command. It used to be a restaurant, "Plave Vode". Here he encouraged the top of the Third Corps of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, represented at the time by Enver Hadžihasanović and general Đemo Merdan, to join potentials and intend to stop the Serbs at least in the area of Karaula and Turbet, and later in the area of Travnik. It didn't matter that we were losing territory and that this front was somehow becoming narrower, that the Serbs were coming closer to us. He kept initiating new activities and encouraging us even to start some minor active attacks. He was personally leading one of those attacks, I remember well, on 13th to the 14th November, he personally... When I said I will launch that operation with the commanding officer Lenda, he said: "No you stay here with Merdana and the rest in the commanding post, and I will launch the operation!" and I remember...

That was the operation "Komar"?

That is...yes, yes, that was towards Komar. In that operation, what is important to point out is that we really didn't have the precise information about the Serbs. That it...

You are talking about that operation, is that right?

Before that operation as well as during that operation. I will get back to that operation a bit later. Namely, during all that time there was some kind of mutual distrust between the representative of the Croats and the Muslim Bosniaks within that Joint Command, the Muslims promoted all the time the idea that they are still defending Jajce, that they are still in the area of the district of Jajce and that they are still performing some kind of defence actions there, which simply wasn't correct. On one of the meetings about that operation towards Komar, I remember well there were also Arif Pašalić, Džemo Merdan, Safet Čibo, Fuad Deberović, Kulenović, then Senad Dautović from Bugojno, Rifet Sipić, and in front of the CDC was Ante Prkačin, colonel Filipović, there were also Praljak and I. And Merdan here presented the situation that the Serbs in Komar do not have strong forces, that they are positioned only in groups on important positions, that they have one entrenched cannon and that we should capture it to improve our positions comparing to Novi Travnik and Travnik. And here general Praljak personally went towards a structure, it's called Vučja Glava, with Refik Lenda, and from Bugojno the operation was supposed to be supported by Senad Dautović. And during that operation...

Has this operation even started?

The operation hasn't even started, actually during that...

But it was planned?

It was planned, arranged, everything. We even had the joint crews. So in that operation we had artillery for the first time. Actually, two are Croats, two are Muslims Bosniaks, also mortars, also some kind of recoilless guns. So, we went with... well then, if one platoon was from the CDC, the other from the Territorial Defence, Praljak was especially careful of those

details, and personally lead that action together with Refik Lenda and Vlaho Jurić. However, that action hasn't started simply because, according to what Praljak told me, Refik Lenda hesitated, hesitated and later said that they are not ready for that operation and that they didn't take control of starting positions. And launching that operation or the beginning of that operation without everyone being on their starting positions would be catastrophic for us because that is one plain, one bare rocky ground especially for that visible part of time. It would lose any meaning and only bring losses. And then Praljak cancelled that action. But what especially fascinated me was that even after the cancellation of that operation, and during the future meetings, Praljak never dived at Lenda to tell him this is your fault, or to give him a bad name in front of us. He only said: the operation has been cancelled because people weren't on their starting positions and in order to avoid a greater damage in our own ranks. Although at the time... that surprised me, he showed a really high level of self-control. Because normally all the commanding officers, after all the efforts, would probably dive at the one who – so to say – hasn't completed his task. That didn't happen with Praljak.

Was it even possible under those conditions, at that time, to realize that cooperation? If I understand well, Praljak tried to achieve that the Army of BH and CDC work together, is that right? How much did his intent – we are talking about him now, although he wasn't alone in it...?

Well, that was very difficult and it looks to me that this amount of cooperation was proportional to the amount of threat from the Serbs obvious to every one of us. As they were getting near to Travnik itself, Zenica and Novi Travnik, this cooperation was spreading and had more quality. On the other hand, he did his best – as a man and a commanding officer – and every day he exhausted and overworked himself to the maximum, daily he slept maybe one to two hours. All the time he was either in the command of the Travnik defence or in that “Plave Vode” where the headquarters of the Joint Headquarters were located, he encouraged both sides to exchange all the information, to take the defence. Even at one point he told me that it would be a lot more productive to transfer some of my obligations, which I had before as the member of that delegation of CDC in those tripartite talks, on someone else and to dedicate myself as much as possible to the defence of Travnik because it is important that we stay here as long as possible. We even had a joint commanding post, on the first line, in the structure M****. That is one famous elevation at the entrance of Travnik coming from Turbet, where we estimated the Serbs would certainly go and that it would be the next structure they would want to take. So, on the front-line itself, in front there were some anti-infantry mine-fields and the front line toward the Serbs. So we stayed on the very front-line. On the other hand he really did everything to introduce all the potentials. I remember well the scene with the director who said...

Director of what?

He was a director, the technical director of this military factory from Novi Travnik. It was called “Bratstvo” Novi Travnik factory, who said that he simply doesn't want to talk outside his working hours.

And what was that he didn't want to talk about?

He didn't want to talk about the help they could give by producing certain ammunition, or those mine explosive devices, and to fill our mines... to produce mines for the 82mm mortars, because they had already regrouped and produced those mines also for 120mm. However, the problem was to get in touch with him, it was late at night, between 1 and 3 o'clock, but the situation was such that even one mine was important to us if we could find it. And then the general said to the military police to arrest him, or simply not to show up without him, and so they arrested him...

Tell me, were you present at the time?

I was present here, in the office... I watched that conversation. And really, that director at that moment, he simply didn't understand the situation in which he will become – and the factory itself – insignificant if this area falls. All of this happens when the front line is only a few kilometres from the factory and when actually, if that line fell, actually there was nothing more to defend. And Praljak told him in a threatening way that he will either produce it now, at the moment – or he will be tied here, or arrested at the spot, and so on. There were also situations when, I don't know... To be fair he came back, it continued,...

Did Praljak succeed at the time, that's what I want to know now?

Yes, yes, he did. The people mobilized. Of course, it worked and they heard that some crazy person is threatening them, that he will lock up that director and so on – although the director was previously the untouchable boss. And of course, when the director is in the factory at two o'clock in the night, then all the workers are here too and nobody asked why they are producing, why they had to work then? There were situations when some military formations simply left. They didn't want to stay here anymore in this area. This is highland area where it is extremely cold and where it is very difficult to stay on the posts. One group, some twenty soldiers who also disobeyed my orders, and all the rest, and for which I had no idea what they would do at the moment, simply said: "Commander, we were there for seven days, we don't want to be there anymore, we are leaving!" and then Praljak told them, he came out, stepped out and said: "This is not going to work. You will not go, I forbid it – and if you want to go, please take off this uniform that you are wearing, leave your guns – someone else will take them, and your uniform too – and you go in your underwear." And he literally said: "We will disarm you all here" – although at that moment we didn't have more than two policemen that we could engage to deal with this group of 20 soldiers. But luckily...

You knew at that moment that you don't have more than two police officers? I knew that we didn't have more...

And you listened to Praljak tell them that?

Yes, yes he said....

Good, and what did you think at the moment?

Well those were the moments when one wrong move, from any side, could lead to them confronting us with arms and charge at us, but...

Was that a possibility?

Realistically it was, because that wasn't a group of soldiers that were, I don't know, that were behaving appropriately. They went through a lot themselves, they were really out on the front-line for seven days. That was really a moment when nuances make a difference, and the fact who will endure longer. Luckily...

And which nuance was crucial?

Well the crucial thing was that the soldiers submitted to the intents and courage of Praljak because, really, I had no idea what to do with those soldiers anymore. There would be no use in locking them up, I loose a front-line we can not close. His words were crucial, he literally said: "If necessary I will lead you and be up there with you, but you are going back – or you should literally take your pants off right now, take everything off, go in your underwear and undershirts and go home. But leave the weapons, because the weapons are not yours. The weapons have to serve to defend this town, even if other farmers I will mobilise use them." And so on, and there, those were, I said there were more such examples but those were the examples where he really managed to motivate and mobilize those people to return and get involved into the defence of Travnik. Thanks to those and similar examples we managed to defend Travnik and managed to stop... that was the first successful intent to stop the Serbian conquest. And by that time Serbs already controlled some 70% of Bosnia and Herzegovina. So, during that period in Plave Vode...

What is Plave Vode?

Plave Vode is the name of the restaurant at the entrance of Travnik on the right hand side and somewhere near is the source of the river Lašva. And here, in that restaurant were the headquarters of our joint command for the defence of Travnik as well as the joint command formed by the officers from the Operative zone of the central Bosnia, the Croatian Defence Council and the 3rd Corps of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, that is, at the time it was called the District headquarters of the Territorial defence of Zenica. In “Plave Vode” we had daily briefings, we considered the current situation on the Travnik front-line and wider. That means that, on the whole front-line that covered the central Bosnia, as well as the District headquarters, later 3rd Corps of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And on those briefings we also considered how to improve the defence of the town Travnik, how to military and professionally train the ranks to use those artillery weapons. During those meetings, where the general Praljak was also present, he stressed that he can help us by bringing a group of volunteer officers who would visit those positions, above all with the artillery weapons, and our units on the first lines, and who would help to organize the firing system and the specific training of those units with those weapons. Those were mostly officers that were never included in actual fighting, but strictly worked on the military training of the commanding officers and the artillery command AAD (Anti Aircraft Defence), antiaircraft defence and infantry weaponry. And especially on those joint meetings...

They were regular?

They were regular, daily, I would say, at least three times a day there was a meeting, and if necessary when called for... Here we also had officers who were on duty together in front of the CDC and in front of the Army of BH, who called them depending on the importance of events. But there was at least a meeting in the morning where we agreed, considered the situation, and in the evening, and if necessary another would be called. On those meetings the possibility of some more active actions were considered to in some way slow down the penetration of the Serbian Army. I remember that on almost all the meetings general Praljak insisted that the commanding officers must spend 80% on the time one the front-lines, that they should visit those positions, and that they should – if we want those actions to succeed and to secure results - that we have to lead those operations personally, and he did it himself. He visited almost all the positions in Travnik, New Travnik. He led one of the operations I was talking about earlier, that operation on Komar, together with Refik Lenda, which did not happen because Lenda himself calculated and kept his military potentials oriented on the Croatian villages, since that conflict only ended at the end of October. Maybe some more about that operation: I remember, and general Praljak told me that immediately after the operation, that he himself went towards the command post on Komar and that he felt very uncomfortable because two personal attendants followed him all the time, soldiers, who were the attendants of Refik Lenda, and that he wasn't sure that any one of them wouldn't, at the right moment, even open fire and try to shoot him. That he felt quite uncomfortable and that he felt unpleasant because he was alone. That also testifies to his bravery, and his readiness and his determination to lead that operation. And even later, after the failure of that operation, to continue cooperating with Refik Lenda, and all the others.

So, regardless of those events, of those circumstances there are still intents to jointly organize the defence?

Yes, yes. The intents were continuous and actually, simply, Praljak didn't allow us to think. I even remember the situation when we managed to destroy the first tank. I believe it was somewhere around the middle of November '92, that my artillery assistant, Ramljak is his name, I think it's Dragan, managed to destroy one Serb tank with a “Maljutka missile” and in that way stop the entire attack, because the Serbs were in a shock. Now suddenly they lost a tank and so on. Then the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina – although they knew, and the command in “Plave Vode” were aware that the tank was destroyed by the officer of the CDC

Operative zone command – they showed that attack as theirs and it was the main news in the media, on the radio in Zenica, on the radio in Travnik, radio Sarajevo and even Sarajevo television. That, I don't know, the defenders of Travnik from the ranks of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina destroyed a tank – what of course caused bitterness in the ranks of CDC, and especially the ranks of those soldiers who were at those positions and who were aware that on that position there are no soldiers of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Praljak hasn't allowed such news – i.e., not that he hasn't allowed it but he intended to stop it showing that it doesn't matter, that we know well who did it and that the interest in joint defence and joint performance against the Army of Republic Srpska is more important, then to fight about who destroyed the tank and so on.

He tried to depreciate it?

Yes. Then we had a situation on Čajdaš, when a commanding officer was killed, Strika Mujo from Zenica. That is the area in the district of Zenica. Supposedly it was done by a member of CDC or the ranks of the Croatian people, although those were some local showdowns etc. I know that two members of CDC were suspects and Praljak personally called the commander of the military police and insisted that everything possible should be done, in cooperation with the members of the military police of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina and other security officers, in order to arrest the suspects and place them in custody. He personally tried to calm that situation and luckily the two were placed into custody.

You know that Praljak was present, so, we said...

So, general Praljak arrived at the beginning of November, somewhere around 11., 12. or 13.11.

Let's say that's the middle.

Yes. Mid-November, and he stayed in Travnik, with some interruptions until 6.12.1992.

Then he came and left again?

Yes. He came and left. I remember he went to visit Vareš. We were in Kiseljak together. Then, from Kiseljak, he went to visit the complete area of Vareš, and the brigade that we had in Vareš, that was commanded at the time by Emil Hara, and I remember that he visited the mayor of Vareš, that he told me that there on paper, it looks to the outside that everything is all right – but that everything is a coating and there is nothing underneath, and that he is worried about the total military organization in Vareš and the way that Vareš acts – in the sense that every transit is charged, and that everybody focuses on the commerce of some kind of merchandise, the expensive one like alcohol, cigarettes and other merchandise that goes to Tuzla and that Vareš actually charges high fees for traffic and transit of these merchandise, and this is charged. And that, among other things, this is the source of conflicts and this mutual friction between Vareš and Kakanj...

Was he angry about that?

Yes, he was very angry. He was very bitter when he came from that meeting. Because, he says, when you look from the outside - everything is fine, those are all some reception rooms painted red, literally, that's what the mayors office is like, that he was surprised when he saw how decorated was that office and all of that. And yes, in fact, he wasn't sure that there is a good military organization underneath all of that.

Another thing that was impressive was the appearance at the beginning of December in Novi Travnik. Since the most violent conflict happened in Novi Travnik: the commanding officer of CDC was killed in Travnik, in Novi Travnik there were around 15 soldiers killed etc., and the situation was very tense and explosive in Novi Travnik between the Croats and Muslim Bosniaks – and then, with the intention to overcome the situation, the leadership of CDU and PDA in Novi Travnik scheduled a gathering, a meeting where everything went wrong again. Marinko Marelja especially stood out with a very vulgar way to direct the Muslim representatives, mincing no words and tone, and he humiliated them a lot calling them names.

At one point Praljak reacted and said something like: “Enough. I don’t want to hear such words anymore. Especially not from you, Marinko Marelja. Stop it.” And then he pointed out a few thesis, he said that we can not deal with all the themes at once and try to find the solutions in advance for all the problems that exist, but we have to take one step at the time and look for the solutions that are possible. To work as much as possible on daily tasks. He literally said: “You already have Serbs up there on the hills, and you are here fighting about the final solutions and final organization of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And that is something that the representatives of the two nations should solve. Finally that’s why the have this mandate.”

How were Praljak’s words received at that moment?

It was a shock. I saw it was a shock especially for the leaders of PDA, for the president, let’s say, PDA, for the president of PDA Novi Travnik. Praljak literally said: “Marelja, you can’t humiliate people like that and show such a level of disregard, insult in this way the gentlemen from PDA. Above all it’s not civilised, no matter how good you know each other.” Marelja said: “Well, good, we know each other. We are close. We went to school together.” We this, we that. He said: “It doesn’t matter, in front of me you can’t say those words. I’m ready to remove you from here and to throw you out if necessary. But you can’t say things like that in front of me.” And then he used a certain tone to try to bring closer the real situation. He pointed out that besides the will and wish that exists on one, and probably the other side, to achieve some kind of solution, we are far from that final solution – but what we need to do now is unite in the fight against the Serbs and stop the Serbian conquest. Simply, he focused on the problems of the defence of those territories, so that we won’t need neither this nor that option if we loose that territory, if we are forced to put in a bag everything we have worked for and leave this area. He literally said that two nations live here, and that they undoubtedly have different views on Bosnia as well as Herzegovina, and its organization – but this is not the priority now. That we also recognize Bosnia and Herzegovina, that it is our country and we don’t have another... Praljak pointed that out on that meeting.

That’s what he said on that meeting?

That’s what he said. And that we want the same rights, and that we ask to be acknowledged here. He also said on that meeting that there were also such appearances by the Muslim Bosniaks who said that the war in Croatia does not concern Muslim Bosniaks. And that they tolerated even the conduct, I don’t know, and the attacks of Serbs from the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but we shouldn’t take that now, those are not the priorities now, and he said that we have to ask for the minimum of that unity to appear in front of the common enemy. He was very harsh here. That was the first time that someone dared to put a stop to that local power-wielder. No matter that he had the support of I don’t know what channels, some leadership – he acted really like a cowboy on his own territory, with his own supporters who doesn’t flinch from using the most vulgar words, curses and insults. However, as I said, he really cut him off at the roots and tried to convince one and the other side that they should continue with this minimum of unity. After that meeting Marelja simply disappeared from the area. He was relieved of all his duties because the representatives of the PDA pointed out that he is, in some way, the point of conflicts. That one can’t cooperate with him etc. I think, I don’t have specific data about it, but I think that Praljak probably did everything to credibly inform the ones who were authorized to remove Marelja – and that they moved him from that area.

Do you have any knowledge how that appearance of Praljak, that is how the representation of that way of thinking influenced the Muslim representatives?

They met it with approval, with a kind of relief and they perked up a bit. I felt that later in the words of the president of PDA who welcomed this appearance, thanked him with a certain appreciation, and who said that this is the right way to build the unity. I remember that.

Who was the president of PDA?

I don't remember his name. I don't remember the name of the person who was the president of the PDA.

Who else from the Muslim side was present at the meeting?

The complete committee of the Party of Democratic Action of Novi Travnik was present. But somewhere in my notes I wrote down the name of that president.

So that was the meeting at the beginning of December?

That was that meeting on 3.12....

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Yes, we were also together, Praljak and I in Zenica, on 6.12., on a meeting with local command of the Croatian Defence Council in Zenica where was especially, let's say, stressed this cooperation with the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, issues were considered, I don't know, of issuing joint passes, agreements, division of some kind of responsibility zones etc. and mostly, I say, the appearance of Praljak favoured the building of the army, introducing order and discipline. That we should continue the cooperation with the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina regardless the problems and difficulties that stand on the way of cooperation. After that, I think that Praljak left again. Because he was, I say, coming and going. But, nevertheless, I don't know, I say, don't know what were the orders he personally got from his co-workers or superiors, but I know that his every arrival was very positive. And that he obtained great results in the field of that cooperation with the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the field of introduction of order and discipline, and that it was the necessary support that we commanding officers needed in order to realize more easily some of our ideas. But above all the idea was related to the joint defence, this connection. Even, let's say, during all that time we had completely integrated ranks. I don't know, on the artillery weapons, in the integrated system of command, leadership, joint reporting, the map were common positions of both parties were drawn, and so on, and no matter what problems there were in everyday... because it was a very complex situation. Some positions were lost here, the battles were led here for almost every meter of the remaining territory. He always tried to find something that connected, something that was common, and simply somehow to leave those problems that would be the seed of dissension for another time.

Tell me, during those events that you are talking about now, what was your relationship with Praljak like? Was it a strictly official relationship, or did you somehow get closed regarding the circumstances you were in?

Well, I didn't, I didn't really see him as my superior, but I did see him like someone who is a lot more than that to me: like a man who is really ready to share every difficulty with me, who is ready to help. Who clearly recognized, who recognized where he can be the most useful. So during this motivation, during this...

Did you, for example, feel relief when Praljak came?

Yes, that... And not only me! And even the municipal leaders of Travnik, and Vitez, and this whole area, so Travnik, Vitez, Novi Travnik, and Busovača felt relief and asked in their official letter to President Tuđman to send someone, asked personally to send him again, to send him again...

They asked to send someone, or they asked to send Slobodan Praljak?

In the beginning some high officers of the Croatian Army, I remember one such letter, to send ones that are professional and so on. And later, after this stay, they asked to send – name and surname – Praljak, again, to help and improve that inner organization, order etc.

That was later, is that right?

That was later.

Does that mean that the Praljak's stay there we can consider as useful, successful – considering that they asked for his return?

Well, the fact that the Serbs were stopped in front of Travnik, that Travnik was a defended city – regardless of the fact that an officer of the UN, colonel Stuart, told me at one point that we have nothing to do in Travnik, that it is partly surrounded and that we basically only have a door to get out through, and that Serbs can whenever they want remove that door, i.e. the only exit from Travnik, and on the other hand, the fact that this time when he stayed, so in November, beginning of December, is certainly the most productive time, of the best and the most efficient cooperation of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Croatian Defence Council. We even, I don't know, I say integrated not only the command, but there were also the defence sectors, there were some plans of common actions, common liberation of Vlasici, up there. On the operational level we worked together. We helped each other with the logistics. It's truth that sometimes we gave some resources to the Army, the Army gave us less – but the Army had, it was more numerous, had more soldiers, but that cooperation was present all the time and Praljak really insisted that we focus on the front every step of the way, so on the front-line in order to use all the potential for the defence, and on the other hand on that professional military part, and that was the organization of the army, the training of soldiers and creation of the army from those armed farmers and enforcement of the order in the functioning of the army itself.

Zagreb, January 2006.

I, signed below, made this statement willingly at the request of the defence of Mr. Slobodan Praljak. The statement relates to my participation and my knowledge about the war in the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I agree with the public use of this statement in order to prove the facts and truths about the previously mentioned events.