

MILENKO ČOLAK

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Interview is recorded under the sign  
micolak 10,40 MB

Length of interview: 32.44 minutes

Interview is held in Ljubuški.

**We are recording. At the beginning of this interview, please state your name, last name, date and place of birth, your current address and your occupation.**

My name is Milenko Colak, son of Ivan Colak, and I have a masters in economics. I was born in Grljevicima which is under the jurisdiction of Ljubuski and I currently live in Vitina which is also in the jurisdiction of Ljubuski.

**Can we start with you explaining something about yourself, obviously talking about the war details, the start, about details of the arguments before the war. Therefore, what were you doing, where did you work at this time, and how did the war start in your end.**

I was working in “Trgocoop” as general director in Ljubuski. That was the biggest retail firm in Ljubuski and was one of 5 biggest firms in Hercegovina. Before that, in 1991, I was the financial manager that was in charge of all finances of Trgocoop in Ljubuski. With regards to the start of the war, it was known that something was going to happen because of everyday life, and especially because of the many meetings that were taking place from Ohrida to Split that were giving inclinations that there was very little hope that there will be a united agreement, other than the time when word came from the confederation, however, unfortunately because of Mr. Alija Izetbegovic who was a member of the Social Republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina and Kiro Gligorov Social Republic of Macedonia, who because of their non- cooperation of the agreement, the only chance of keeping any confederation of Jugoslavia in tact was broken.

**And what else was happening? Where were you ?**

I was taking care of necessary inventory in the jurisdiction, in considering that there were preparations for war being made.

**Jurisdiction, which one?**

The jurisdiction of Ljubuski. As the main person who has ties with the strongest firm, logically and under the plan of war, would have to insure that there were enough supplies for the people.

**And you did that?**

I did that, and I in fact had an interview on Radio Ljubuski. The director was Mr. Nikica Siljeg, who called me to the interview. That is where I called out to anyone that was able to work considering the circumstance that we were facing at the present time, to maximize domestic production and to create storage for supplies because it was known that war was upon us. I have, and I will give you the questions that Mr. Siljeg asked, and the same time I don't know if the recording of the interview was kept.

**When did this happen?**

The war had already begun in Croatia, which means, it was 1991.

**Ok. What was the state here?**

Well, there was in general, a lot of observations to our surroundings and what was going on, however, it was surprising to us that the war started first in Croatia than here.

**Alright. After the war started in Croatia, how did that continue to reflect life in these areas, on the relations between people?**

Well, mainly the border between Croatia and Hercegovina did not exist. The border came in 1993. This means that this was one body, one unit, one territory. Because it was until, I think that it was the minister of foreign affairs, that it was Mr. Granic Mate of the Republic of Croatia and that the minister of finances was Mr. Dr. Jasic, with which for the first time there was the idea of a border, so I was in talks with minister Jasic to establish a system of customs control traffic between the Republic of Croatia and the Croatian Republic Herceg-Bosna with customs control from 1%. Details of that understanding were with Mr. Knezic, who was the director of customs Republic of Croatia.

**Fine, without consideration on what you say that it was one territory until 1993, I remember that you told me in our conversation before we turned on the tape recorder-meaning before a few days ago- that you provided weapons and that delivery was not at all easy, regardless that it went without Croatia's help. Is that correct?**

That's correct. The firm "Trgocoop" Ljubuski in their registration has also registration to operate with trade weapons. In that operation, we has ordered weapons from "Zastava" from Serbia, after that from "Igman", but Konjic we ordered weapons from "Unis", Sarajevo and anyone who had any.

**What does it mean "ordered?"**

Ordered to trade and to sell.

**Meaning to buy?**

Yes, yes.

**That was the way in which people were armed in these jurisdictions?**

Yes, that was the way in which we provided the hunters with

weapons, but also rifles and everything else that was interesting in the conditions at the time.

**And was that a problem, how that was happening at the time?**

Well, actually in consideration on the bloody events already happening in Croatia that was everything after Plitvice, and most importantly it was difficult. Meanwhile here, it was a state of anarchy. JNA subjects were already in Mostar, they were troops from Montenegro who had their own control points on Orlofac, on Kobilovac, those are places where you descended from to get to Mostar, meanwhile we ignored their posts and patrols and we entered into Mostar without consideration that there were a lot of the Serbian and Montenegrin mobilized army reserves, maybe the most from Montenegro and through once chance, actually, we attained some ammunition from "Igman"-Konjic. Mr. Jasmin Guska was the boss, police chief in Konjic, that way he assured that the cargo which we drove to the border of Mostar was safe. We passed Mostar and no one controlled us.

**When was this?**

I would say, it's hard to date, war in Croatia had already started but it did not start in Bosnia Herzegovina yet, which means, just in case it would have been before 01.04.1992. Which means in 1991 or maybe the beginning of 1992.

**And, you say Jasmin Guska helped there?**

Yes, yes.

**To come to the merchandise that you were looking for?**

Yes, the boss that got it was Mr. Zima, which was his nickname, he assured the merchandise from the firm Igman in Konjic, which was approved by their general director. The merchandise was paid through an account meaning, through an invoice, meaning through the social service bookkeeping at the time. Meaning, that was the regular way to get merchandise. Through that opportunity, I even assured one transport of ammunition to Metkovic, they were afraid to drive it so I drove it for them.

**Tell me, did you have more of these deliveries through these channels or was that a rare or one time occasion?**

Well, actually, it was already a serious war, that was in Posusje's Rastovac creation of the first brigade HVO, when the representative, director and assistant director of the army complex, the Novog Travnik industrial army complex, I think that it was the manufacturer of VBR. At the time, they offered VBR's heat with 42 pipes, where they wanted me to connect with responsible people in the Republic of Croatia's Ministry of Defence. Contact was in Posusje at the creation of the brigade, but "Bratstvo" from Novi

Travnik and their director to return the favor, received food from the Republic of Croatia, from the merchandise reserves of the Republic of Croatia.

**You said that lasted until April of 1992, if I understood you correctly?**

Well, actually, I think that this happened on the day of the creation of the first brigade in Posusje, which means we need to double check the date. Otherwise, I can say my business was across Croatia's enterprise "Fruit Import-Export" was the Republic of Croatia distributor of goods for all of Bosnia and Hercegovina.

**That means for all of Bosnia and Hercegovina?**

For all that needed food.

**Who responded?**

All the communities that believed that they had a reason to seek food, which means...

**Let's be specific. Were these exclusively communities from...**

Central Bosnia.

**...Croatian population, or that wasn't it..?**

In principle. Meaning, it was already clear what territory it was, which represents one body, one Croatian body. Starting from Central Bosnia to Jablanica, Mostar to Neum.

**Were there Muslims and Serbians who were there in that manner...?**

Well, they were at the commercial beginning. Reserves of goods were sold on commercial beginnings, meaning, anyone who came to buy could buy it because the goods had a fixed price. Mr. Klaric was the co-ordinator of the sales of goods in front of the firm "Fruit Import-Export" Zagreb.

**Good. In your practice, when you did this: did they contact you, were there any trade relations with places where there were a majority of Muslim population?**

It was from Maglaja, let's say.

**And they received the goods?**

Yes, yes.

**When was that trade contact with Maglajem?**

That was, that was let's say, I can't remember exactly, but it was a round the time when provisions and preparations were made in Bugojna. Meaning, that was there until the war started in Bugojna.

**OK.**

Because they have the main chief, Mr. Ante Jelavic. They ordered 2 trucks of cardboard bags.

**Cardboard bags?!**

Cardboard bags, meaning containers. Because "Natronka" in Magalj they manufactured it and in return, we gave them provisions.

**Did we also give to the Serbians like that?**

The main territories that were under Serbian power, there was little trade happening.

**There weren't any inquiries into it?**

They had steady provisions for Beograd, they didn't have the need for here...Except later, what happened, that was when there was some goods deal with fuel, but that was insurance of passage so that the chosen Croatian forces can be drawn out from the Muslims enclosing in.

**Tell me about the third month in 1993, there was a meeting in Ljubuski. Were you present at that meeting?**

I heard about the meeting, but I was not invited to that meeting, nor was I at the meeting, but I found out after the meeting that someone nominated me in this body of work which needed consultation to help civilian's ability to refuse hardship around mobilization and surrounding agreement of the activity of civilian and army authority.

**What does that mean? Does that mean that that problem was actual and that it was actually then...**

Then there was already hardship with mobilization, since the office of defence wasn't properly doing their job, because we had incidents where calls for mobilizations were not signed, but delivered mobilized people without the signature of the representative of the office of the boss of the office.

**What was the response like then for mobilization?**

Well, evidently, as soon as there was a need to fill the formations, meant that there was a breaking out and there was avoidance of duties and the regular sending off to the fields. There was an established rhythm: Ten days in battle, twenty days free. But evidently the biggest problem was when those people came home for twenty days and returned again in

the regime of war. The reason why that regime was established was because we didn't have strong financial sources and then for those 20 days people would obtain for their families enough until the next time. It was agriculture or a trade or it was some other activity.

**Did you have a chance, in those years of war, to meet or to be introduced to General Praljak?**

I had a few occasions where I was present at command, and mainly I had very good impressions of the way he presented himself and how he governed. In a very positive way, Mr. Praljak distinguished himself from the remaining other commanders.

**Coincidentally, you and I know General Praljak-but how would you explain to someone who has never met General Praljak, who has never seen and do not know anything about him, why he distinguishes himself from others? How was he different from others?**

Well, I think it was fundamental that he insisted that every command by the commanders had to be enforced, and only after that can you regret it.

**Because of that he was different?**

That was the fundamental principle, that there was absolute authority in that no one second guessed, no one tried to break command.

**Were you aware in some situations when Praljak reacted on disobedience? How did he act when, let's say, that in which he wanted or desired something done, would not be done. In what way did he act?**

I was not present in any situation where someone showed disobedience. But I will tell you why, Mr. Praljak when he took over command, he told all commanders that if you don't follow his commands that they don't need to wait, because they will be killed.

**He said that?**

Yes.

**How did people react to that?**

People knew that they had to follow command.

**Was that at the time weird considering on....?**

It was not weird, it was normal for those before who were managing, because they didn't recognize army organization.

**Did Praljak manage to move things and qualitatively promote the organization?**

With regards to the organization of the army, he surely was a great commander of the army.

**Did we forget to mention anything?**

I would like to say, I think we should have at the beginning addressed it in the section when I was introducing myself, that I was a legally selected member of the municipality's council of the Municipality of Ljubuski until the war. I was the president of the local association council in the assembly of the Municipality of Ljubuski, and I am the man who related questions of the disarming of the defence territory, I have here the record saved, that was 04.06.1990 in a space in "Agroprom" in Ljubuski, where there was a room that can hold a lot of people. The meeting had forty delegates of united work, twenty delegates of the local organization council, and 18 delegates of the social political council, from that there was twenty-one present from the council of united work, twenty from the local organization council and ten delegates from the social political council. And there I placed that the end of the daily order, insisted actually, in the purpose to find respect constitutionally and legally from the institutional system and to all parts of the functioning system with that in harmony, in the purpose to explain the problematic exclusion of the arming of the defence territory, I Milenko Colak, quoted the law of the constitution of the Social Federal Republic of Jugoslavija from 1974 and the amendment on the constitution of SFRJ from 1981 and 1988 from the Law the greater community of defence SFRJ 21.82 and gave a written appendix with the record and I looked for replacement of responsibility from those who are responsible in the first place the commander of TO of the republic of Bosnia Hercegovina, and insisted the return of resources and preparations of TO and to conduct and question if the weapons were in fact taken away, because with them it is not available to troops of our community and the greater community, because the key to the warehouse is found at the troops of JNA and that in Capljina and Mostar. Actually, that was part of the arming which was in the storages of tobacco stations, which they used as warehouses for arming TO, like the Social Republic of Bosnia Hercegovina territory army, but every enterprise had their own arming warehouse and that was the most modern and newest arming which the Defence territory of Bosnia and Hercegovina had, there were semi automatic guns, in "Trgocoop" in Ljubuski, there was 18 semi automatic guns, 2 automatic rifles, and two 60mm cannons. Therefore, I at the time, at the meeting delayed the legal solution because the law of the greater community does not allow for technical material resources in this case, arms confiscated to give to JNA, that was the only possibility in subordination in the idea that the unit of TO, together people and technical material resources fall under the command of JNA. Evidently, if it was done unlawfully and actually, that act and this line that I drew was, questioning the preservation of the defence ability of the Social Republic of Bosnia Hercegovina. Next, if I didn't assure the majority at voting at the Community Ljubuski meeting, then I the next day requested any wrongful information against the Presidency of Bosnia Hercegovina, because it was against the constitution and the law to disarm the people. Next, Mrs. Jasna Misetic was the community's prosecutor, she took

that matter to a higher Republican court and after approximately a month the verdict came in, or after a month and a half, from what I remember, the verdict came from the Republic prosecutor, that there is no element of wrongful responsibility from the Presidency of the Social and Republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina, and that I, Milenko Colak, if I am not satisfied with their verdict to sue the Presidency of Jugoslavija. With consideration that the troops of TO in the competence of the Presidency of the Social Republic of Bosnia Hercegovina, I didn't think that I need to bring forth a complaint against the SFRJ presidency because this was the last legal act which I tried to keep the constitutional harmony of this state, and that public bodies who protect this state didn't support, then didn't have another solution but to organize a local critical organization of defence in the community of Ljubuski, that was August 26, 1991, which was composed of 11 people, among there I was there and from then in fact, preparations for war started. These preparations for war were entirely independent, unfortunately we had one experience when in the Republic of Croatia's southern battlefield, it was very dangerous when the troops of JNA came to Slanog, to Cepikuca, we had already formed troops in front of the headquarters of TO, we prepared entirely for defence and 10 armed groups, 20 people who were held 2 days in the tobacco warehouse in Metkovic, they weren't included in the defence operation and were sent back here in thinking that the officials of the Republic of Croatia didn't want to use them in the defence activities so it doesn't create some obligation of favours that we call for help.

**That was told to you or did that happen...?**

That's what happened, simply, all their lines are falling, and they don't use accommodating strength, meaning they don't have another reason.

**Yes, but this interpretation that they didn't want to use that potential in that moment because of that they would create a state of obligation. Was that official?**

That was, Manolic was then the premier and in all mediums and media they tried to show isolated defences of the Republic of Croatia, in all mediums that was present. I will show you one more example of this, after Manolic, premier was from Varazdin, help me with his last name, he was a tall gentleman, he walked in slippers around Sabor, and Mr. Gregoric in the Republic of Croatia's national newspaper did not allow the sales of food needed for Croatia, the same time all dried meat production, production of long lasting food without exception of Hercegovina and Herceg Bosna and Bosnia Hercegovina. Probably, his estimate was then that they don't have enough quantity for their needs. So there were occasions that I for the troops of TO on the jurisdiction of Opuzen sent word for canned meat from vojvodinian stores of dried meat production.

**Let's clear up one thing: You tell me that at the beginning the sales of merchandise went?**

Yes.

**And now you are telling me that Gregoric said not to export?**

I think Gregoric was earlier then these reserves of merchandise....

**Meaning after Gregoric that was....**

Yes, yes

**What about at the time of Gregoric?**

Manolic and Gregoric were those who were very strict that de facto, any reason nor co-operation nor help was existent.

**And after that?**

After that, meaning when the new 1. HVO brigade came to be, after that, which means, after we sent word for VBR, what was, which means, 20 VBR's make...But if we knew how much work it was worth, one cannon Nora is worth 1.5 million marks, so you can imagine how much it costs for one make for 42 pipes? And here we have 20 VBR's. And thankfully for the shipment and for the director of Novi Travnik's "Bratstva" from Novi Travnik and his assistant and after this shipment then the Republic of Croatia paid the merchandise reserves in food.

**Did we say everything? Is there anything that we didn't say in the beginning?**

With regards to authority and that state, de facto, there was one period when every municipality functioned like their own defence troops, when there was no co-ordination between municipalities in Hercegovina.

**What period was that?**

That was the period up to the formation of HVO. That was the period when every president of their municipality had estimated and had authority for preparation for war. And then, on one clever way there were people who started resistance of JNA and resistance of Serbian control, then through excuses, that on the head of command, people need to come who had army experience from JNA, but were designated, then they started replacements of commanders in territory organization and the formation of GS in Grude. And I think that the first real command in Grude was with Milivoj Petkovic, meaning, when his appointment took place.

**Ok, Mr. Colak, thank you very much.**

You are very welcome.