

KARLO DŽEBA

KARLO DŽEBA

Ljubuški

November 2005.

The conversation is recorded, the recording is filed under the label

kadzeba

23,7 MB

duration: 01:14:15

Conversation was led in Mostar

Here we go, we are plugged in. I would ask you, at the beginning of this recording, that you introduce yourself, so your name and surname, date and place of your birth, residence, profession.

Karlo Džeba, from Mostar, born 13.07.1960. I live in Mostar. I am a teacher by profession.

A teacher of what?

Physical education.

A teacher of physical education.

Yes.

In high school?

I am not working as a teacher right now, but that is my vocation.

Alright. Mr. Džeba, tell me how the war started for you? Where were you?

For me, the war started that day when Mostar was shelled, when the reserves came before that and when Mostar became exposed to shelling and with the arrival of the Serbian – Montenegrin armies on these territories. That is when we, at least in the area I lived in, that was Cernica – that was the centre of the city at that time, along the Neretva, along the right bank of the Neretva, that is when we self-organized and set off in the creation of an army formation, if it can be so said. A formation that was ready to defend itself from that. That was the beginning of the 4th month in the year 1992. That is when we set out. A very small number of people, composed, before anything, that formation of Croats and Muslims and some Serbs who stayed in that area. And

that was on a voluntary basis, nothing was forced, violently forced, but it was purely on a voluntary basis and then we started off with a sort of learning and teaching of how to create an army formation.

And you stay in that formation until the end of the war?

That was the formation in the beginning, how it was then called, I cannot recall those dates here now, but it was something like, “Defense of the city”, well it was THAT, now I do not know the timing of who was there from what date to what date. Mainly, it was based in that region where Croats and Muslims predominantly lived, that was along the bank. On that region and it was pure, to say it like that, the formation in that part of the city. After, now I cannot say because I do not know, on the basis of what talks and negotiations, the Mostar battalion was founded.

From that formation?

That formation was the integral component of that battalion. The Mostar battalion was in a few of these city areas, mostly along the Neretva: Luka, Mahala, Cernica, previously named Šantićeva street – and of those individual formations was formed the Mostar battalion. I don't know on the basis of what talks and negotiations, I couldn't have even known that because at that time I was practically not tied into politics, nor into any of those political happenings. Our only aim was that we secure that area, to protect the residences in that area from further attacks from the JNA military and the para-militaries. I was the commander of this formation in Cernica which was structurally, a company or a troop, how does...a battalion is a wartime formation, and then below that come the companies, rather, the troops. I was the commander of that formation and I was chosen by the people of this area of the city as the commander. So, it did not come as

a direction that there would be someone, it simply occurred in that self-gathering and through some sort of self-organization without any political philosophizing the people from that part of the city thrust me into the position on the spot. What do they say, chosen from nothing, right. Hey, that is how it was. I think I can find the documents of that formation. After all, that is what I was saying earlier and I can deliver that the next time we meet again. In them was information about when someone was admitted, when someone withdrew, when someone was injured, when someone was killed, in other words, a very correct and detailed document from that time period. At that time, I think, the commander of the Mostar battalion was Suad Čupina. It probably is in keeping with your information. I rarely saw him, very rarely, because that part of the city was exposed to horrible shelling, it was practically the front line, the front line was at one time on the left bank, the battle until the left bank fell, so that we practically became...the Neretva was the boundary, we were the first on the Neretva and we were exposed to shelling and artillery fire, and there were many snipers and all the other weapons in that area. That is why the commandantship rarely came, so at that time, I saw Čupina very, very rarely. Afterwards more frequently, but then, very, very rarely. So much so that it fell more or less on us to come out from under there, to go out for weapons, to find our own way – either for equipment, or for food, to bring it down there on our own, no one really sent us much logistics, but rather we went out for it.

Tell me how long do you stay in the Mostar battalion?

Sometime until after the liberation of Mostar- that was the 6th month, to the 7th month of the year 1992. That means, from the 4th month to...I don't know the exact date of the forming of the battalion, but our formation was formed in the 4th month of the year 1992.

And after that?

After that I stayed there until the 7th month of the same year. After, I move to the Southeastern Hercegovina zone and later into the MUP.

And then you stay...

I continue to stay in the MUP- until the end of the war.

Can we now return to the very beginnings of the happenings of the war? You say, the četnik attacks instigated the organization of defense; organizing themselves together in a formation are Croatians, Muslims and Serbs who...

Serbs who stayed. There were very few, but there were a few of them.

According to your memories of that period – what were the biggest problems with which you were being confronted, and how did you solve them?

The problems were – we have mentioned these – very hard shelling of that area of the city. The problems were logistical, tied to armament in the beginning, since it was the very beginning that was one glaring problem, all of us did not even have a rifle, in fact, there were very few so we had to trade with those of us who were going on a shift or on some assignment and then he would entrust it until that man returned, and then someone else would borrow it and so on. Those were those beginnings, beginning happenings and beginning problems. Shelling was the biggest problem, many civilians were killed in that part of the city, because the dilapidated houses were...

What part of the city are you thinking about?

I am thinking about this part where I was, I can only speak about that...

Cernica?

Yes, Cernica. That is correct. Because I spent that time there and I can only speak on what I maybe heard about the other parts of the city, but...Cernica was in great ruin, many of the civilians who stayed had perished, so later people pulled out, civilians, so that only we were left down there. Maybe it is important to mention 10.05., I think it was 10.05., but one can verify this easily...

1992.?

1992., the same year, that is correct...that the left bank fell. The left bank fell and that is when the shift change occurred in the Mostar battalion. Suad Ćupina was no longer the commander, but it was Arif Pašalić. He already was there before that date. And, now their exact initial surrender, I cannot tell you that, but it occurred between the 4th month and 10.05. That is when the entire left bank fell. That is when Arif called me to help to transport civilians, because there were many civilians left over on the left bank, and injured soldiers, basically the soldiers who were retreating, because one part was injured, one part was healthy, but could not resist. So with a few rubber boats which we found, we transported the entire remaining army, civilians and injured from the left bank to the right bank. That occurred in the area up from the bridge on Musala, the then called Tito's bridge. On the Musala under the hotel "Neretva". At that time the hotel was burning, next to it used to be Tito's villa, that is the continuation of the hotel, both were burning. The Neretva was, the dam was lowered, the Neretva was wide one mountain to

another, as we customarily say. Tito's bridge was standing, but they could not get across Tito's bridge, because there was a sniper covering Tito's bridge. At that time, there was a woman lying dead across that bridge for a few days. That is why they didn't dare cross the bridge, because they would be killed in the crossing and then Arif called me to organize transportation, if it was possible, because the conditions were very difficult. That is when we descended on the Neretva, 10 or so of us, me and my two other colleagues rowed with difficulty across to the opposite bank and transported the remaining army, civilians – women and children mostly civilians, and the injured on the right bank. That lasted somewhere between 9, 10 o'clock at night until 3 o'clock in the morning, that transporting. That means we evacuated completely all of the remaining people on the left bank when the left bank fell, that day.

Was your group the only group doing that, or were there more groups?

The only group who was doing that was my group. No one else did that.

Only you?

We were the only ones who then pulled out the remaining civilians, injured and other soldiers from the left bank to the right bank.

Do you know approximately the number of people then...?

Well, there were, there were a hundred of people. I cannot know say how much, but there were over 100, 150 people for sure. Were there 200, I could not say, but there were very many. Very many, and with that it lasted very long, you can see from the hours spent, if from 9, 10 o'clock in the evening until 3 in the morning, and in every boat, boats with which we transported were

those yellow rubber Maestral boats, there could only fit around 4, 5 people. Then you can imagine how many times that rubber boat had to go.

Were you under fire?

We were not under fire, but we were lit up as if it was the afternoon, because the hotel “Neretva” and Tito’s villa were burning, and we were down there in the recess, so we were not seen, probably if they were in the mountains, because we were down there under, but it was like daytime, it was visible like in the daytime, there was so much noise, the hotel was burning, and that was in the immediate vicinity, 10, 15 metres from the hotel.

What towns or villages, what places did those people that you were evacuating come from?

They were mostly from Mostar, from the left bank. Mainly from Mostar, meaning, people...

There were no people who came from other towns or villages, surrounding areas?

No, no. Maybe there was a small unknown number, but mostly there were people from Mostar and then, maybe this will be important, Faruk Čupina, who was a lawyer in Mostar, and who to this day is a lawyer, brother of Sud Čupina, this Suad, when I crossed to the left bank with much difficulty, because the Neretva was enormous, we tied a rope to the right bank, then rowed across over there, then give them our rope to drag us in and that was the system of transport with ropes. We did not row any more, it was crucial to row across the first time, later we used ropes to be dragged in from one side to the other, like a ferry, let’s say, that system. When I crossed over, he was the first to want to get into the boat to be saved, saying, “I am the commander of Carina, so I will go first!” I did not allow him to cross, because as a commander he should have gone last, not

first. When the entire army and civilians cross. Then I transported the first group which consisted of 4 injured people and then I personally transported two more groups, and after that these others continued to do that. They were mostly from Mostar...

When did Mr. Faruk Čupina cross?

He did later when I was not there, the first 3,4, groups I transported personally, and then later others did that, they saw how it had to be done, and then when I was not there, he jumped into the next boat, the first one I was not in and he escaped. And I never saw him after that for a while. Afterwards I saw him in the headquarters, he was handing out gasoline, doing something in logistics, I don't know what. Of course, in logistics of the HVO.

What was the ethnic composition of the people that you were then saving?

Well, they were predominantly Muslim.

Predominantly?

Predominantly Muslim. I was surprised at the number of people that had stayed, civilians on that left bank, I couldn't believe it, I thought that only the army was there. But no, there were, there were also some civilians, there were a lot of children. Children and... So that night, not one of those people were killed, we evacuated all of them, we transported all of them, no one fell into the Neretva, no one succumbed to it there, no one was killed by shelling.

You did that very well under those conditions...

We did an excellent job, because to transport so many people in one night in a rubber boat in that primitive way, on the Neretva, whose dam at that time was lowered, and was very large, very awkward to cross, we did an excellent job.

Was Mr. Arif Pašalić satisfied with the completed job?

Well, look, I am not sure that he was...

He had called you, is that right?

He asked of me to do that job, to do what I could, of course, I think that no one at that time had expectations for results to be 100% effective or that would allow...there, we were lucky to have been able to able to transport in that way all those people, all of them, and to have no one get killed. That means, that exceeded all expectations. That night I came some time after that, around 3 o'clock, it was already morning, by the time I changed my clothing, and such, maybe it was 4 o'clock in the dawn. I went to Arif and he was at that time on the phone, and in the room where they were, where he was on the phone, that is where they slept I think, I think, I am not sure, two men I am sure of, the third I am not sure, was Suda Ćupina, there was Šemsudin Hasić and this man Kemo, Kamal, I cannot remember his last name, he was an officer of the former JNA, he flew helicopters, since Arif was also associated with aviation, they knew each other from that time; and Šemsudin was also into helicopters. So since Arif Pašalić was the deputy commander of the military airport before the war, then he knew them, they were all aviators, so he was well...

So, you arrive at Arif's and you find Ćupina, Hasić and...

And Kemo, Malog, Mali [Little One], like that, he was younger so they called him that. They were sleeping, Arif was on the phone, I don't know with whom. When I arrived at his place, he stopped talking on the phone, I don't know who he was talking to, he was on a radio station, call. These three were sleeping.

What did he say...

It was unclear to me that with such an important occurrence, that with such an important occurrence that people can sleep, and hundreds of civilians and soldiers were being saved.

That group with which you went, which went with you, which that night transported people were...

They were exclusively mine, from my formation. They were people exclusively from Cernica, my soldiers.

Those were Croatians and Muslims?

They were for the most part, Croatian and Muslim. That part of the city was predominantly Muslim, they lived in that part of the city, and then there were Croatians and there were some Serbians.

And that group which went then was mixed, is that right? Those were shared...?

Well, yes it was, of course, it was mixed. Just as the formation was, that is how the composition of all the rest of it was as well. Now I can remember the names of maybe five men, who

participated there with me, but the rest I cannot. Maybe if I could remember. Zaimović was with me and the younger Humo...

Zaimović?

Zaimović Esmir and Humo Mirza, they were with me in the boat then.

Humo Mirza?

Humo Mirza, he was killed later. They were with me when we rowed across after many attempts. It was very difficult, it was difficult to cross to the left bank, but they were with me then in the boat, they were with me in the boat when we crossed over to the left bank where the civilians and injured were. That is that group.

Alright, so what happened after the pulling out of these people?

After that the left side falls. That night also we transported the body of the dead woman on the bridge. With much difficulty, with some ropes, improvising, because she was in the middle of the bridge, it was difficult to get to her, the bridge was covered by a sniper, but we got her too, since we got all of them, then we pulled her out too. She was dead for a few days on the bridge and then we...

She was killed by a sniper?

She was killed by a sniper when as a civilian she tried to cross from the left bank to the right and that was a deterrent for these people not to cross the bridge, but to search for an alternative. And so we took her dead too, I don't know her name, I can maybe find out, but these other ones

maybe know who were there. It won't be difficult to find out her name. Maybe at another opportunity. The left bank fell then and the line of demarcation was simply the Neretva. They were on the left side and we were on the right side and then my, my area or the area where I was located Cernica was directly on the front line. And then it became more intense. Until then, there was shelling of everything, then there was much more of that, because we were practically exposed daily to snipers, shells, there were so many shells, in the hundreds. We had already pulled out the civilians so there were many less casualties, civilian. And that is that, now...

What is the situation in the city like? Did the refugees come, how does the problem of refugees become solved...?

The refugees were...

What is the situation of order in the city?

I cannot speak about the city, because the city was behind me. The part of the city that I was controlling, that street, that quarter was turned into the front line. That central part, the central part prior to the war was no longer central, but was the front line, and this city stayed behind me and that is where people lived. And now, how they lived is hard for me to know, because I was mostly down there, I sent people for the logistics, sometimes I would even go, but I spent most of my time in that area, where they would come to me with help sometimes, depending on the schedule they had, 3. battalion, 3. battalion would come, the companies rotated with them according to their schedule, I don't know the exact schedule now, but they would come there to help me because for me it was, I had a number of people who could not completely cover that area, because it was very large, the region was very large, and I did not really have a large

number of soldiers, so they often came to me in aid. The refugees did not come because they could not come, they couldn't, because it would be crazy to come, that was the front line, you know. But, only later when the left bank was liberated did the refugees, later on the 12th going onto the 13th 06., I think it was then, then when the front line was restored to Podvelež, when we crossed over to the left bank and then to Podvelež- that is when the refugees already began coming from Gacka, Nevesinja, Muslims mostly. In other words, sometime in the 6th month, 7th, and they were coming in large numbers, and I saw them a lot then. Before that when the line was on the Neretva they were not here, they could not come, because the četniks were there, they didn't have a place to go to. And then we come to the destruction of Tito's bridge, the bridge on the Musala after that, so that the line that was on the Neretva practically, but the bridge was there, so there was always hope that the bridge could be used to cross and so on. And, then here I do not know the exact date that the bridge was destroyed, but it is there, it's not a problem to find, that is simply when all abilities to communicate with bridges halt because there are no more bridges. There is the Old bridge which was riddled below, which was not for, it was for pedestrians, it wasn't meant for the transport of automobiles, so practically that bridge on the Musala which fell after that cut off every illusion that you could do something over there via the bridges, and organize some sort, some sort of liberation of the left bank using bridges. That is when that line becomes concrete on the Neretva at one time and then firing back and forth over the water. From one side to the other.

Tell me how, at that time how did you solve the logistical problems?

We mainly had to go to get the logistics. Mostly we went, I remember the first rifle well, we would go to Cim, up in the warehouse.

Where?

To Cim, to Cim. Up in the warehouse, the center of the logistics, where Dika Slezak and our men were. I got our first rifles there and all the rest and we started off from there. After that some type of an agreement was made that one part, most probably of that central logistics, goes around to the battalions so that that distribution eventually came to the central battalion, where our logistics men then went to get that and then brought it down to us on the front lines.

Alright. The whole time about which we speak Croats and Muslims are fighting together against the četnik?

That is right.

Are there any sorts of signs – and if there are what are they, how do they manifest themselves - any tensions of the sort that will later on occur between the Muslims and Croats?

In my formation there was none of that. In my formation. My formation was, here, look, the majority were Muslim, but they obeyed all of my commands and they never reacted in retaliation to anything that I said. At that time, they were very much like true soldiers. They listened to what was said to them. And that wasn't at all disputable because whenever something needed to be done, or whenever we needed to go into action, or anything like that, I always went first. So there was no reason for them to say: "We aren't going to go because you are pushing us to go...", rather, I went, and then they followed me, so they saw that if I went first that there is no reason for them not to go, from the saving of those civilians to the liberation of the city in the 6th month, when Mostar was liberated. So I never had any problems in that time. None.

There were no tensions?

No, no. None with me. But because later on the goals and the direction things were going in became evident, there were probably a number of people who tried to maybe impose the idea that the Army should be formed, rather than having the battalion a part of the HVO – which later, time would teach was the goal. But at that time when I was there, they obeyed all of the commands I gave. If we can say commands, because that was a formation gathered from the streets, mainly it was people from that quarter, mainly. Until Mostar was liberated, then these others approached me, from these other formations...

Does something then change in the formation?

No, no. While I was there, while I was there they were all, all soldiers, now I am speaking of Croatians and Muslims and the remainder of the Serbians, very disciplined.

Tell me, during the liberation of the city – where were you, your group, what were you doing, what were your tasks?

On that day, the day before the liberation of the city I was assigned a task from the Headquarters to go in a diving search under the bridge in Drežnica, I was an underwater diver and kayaker, my sport was close in my life and in my career, so that before the war I had the privilege of being in some of those clubs where I could underwater dive and kayak and so on. That day I was on my way through Vrđi to Drežnica to dive under the bridge to search explore with two other divers from Mostar, because the bridge in Drežnica was the only bridge then which was stable to be crossed with cars, trucks, the rest of them were all destroyed, except for the Old bridge which was a pedestrian bridge. That day I bumped into Slavo Puljić, this man who is sitting there, he

was the then commander of that formation, it was MUP police's army reserve – and I also came down from Goranci and Vrde , we completed that task. The bridge had two columns, one of which was 24 meters deep...

How much?

24. One was 21 meters. We went right to the bottom. These other two went right down to the bottom, I remained above for protection, so the bridge was not mined and that day I, meaning, the bridge in Drežnica...

It was not mined?

It was not mined. There were no explosives placed on it, as opposed to these other ones which ended up in the air and that is when I returned down there to Mostar, again using the same road, and down there in my command center, which was in the “Elektro Hercegovina” company – since it was the most stable building there, so we chose that one for the command center, they waited for me with information that we would cross the Neretva that night here in Mostar, and to prepare, and organize ourselves as best as we knew how. However we knew – in that we should make available boats, people, arms, and all that we needed, that we would on that part of the city, in that quarter that was, held by us, that one of the passages would be that one, on that part of the city. That night, sometime around 12 o'clock, of course we had organized ourselves, gathered boats, and all that we needed, etc, that night we organized ourselves and sometime around 12 o'clock, maybe a bit earlier, I think that it was midnight, Arif called us to a meeting in the command center. Me and my deputy went and then we met up with the rest, I think we were the last to arrive, there were about 10 or so more people, the commanders of these other formations

and all of that inside the battalion. And Arif outlined a plan to free the central part of the city. When I say the central, I am thinking of the strictest city limits to which my formation also belonged. And then he outlined the plan that just before that he was in the command centre of the HVO, with Praljak and with the others...

He said that at the meeting?

He said that at that meeting where the plan about how we were going to cross the Neretva was brought up, that we would be going to cross in three parts via water and one via a bridge. The three sections we were to cross over water were supposed to be: Šantićeva Street, the former Šantićeva Street; the second in Cernica, meaning, if we go down the Neretva, that is why I am putting them first, second; the third was over the Old bridge, in other words, the bridge crossing, the first two were water crossings, that was a bridge crossing over the Old bridge; and in Donja Mahala , in other words that is down there south, also a water crossing in Kamenica down there along Donja Mahala.

Donja Mahala?

Donja Mahala, yes. Therefore, three water crossings and one Old bridge. And then these men replied where they would cross, that there would be needed 100 people at each of the crossings and that behind those 100 people that there would be 30 police officers VP [acronym for the military police]. That area when it was to be liberated would then be taken over by the VP and they would resume their obligation to guard the installation and all the rest of it. So the plan was practically, if we are looking at 100 people at each crossing, so 400 people and behind them 30 police officers on every crossing. Therefore, about 130 people at every crossing, in that the first

who are to cross are the fighters, and then the VP behind them to secure the liberated area. Of course VP HVO – because there was no other VP. And that is when that was organized at that meeting where these people said where they would cross. Let's say, Šantićeva, the formation from Šantićeva, which was supposedly led under Cernica, but they were really separate, there was Semče, Semir Temin...

Temin?

Semir Temin was the commander of that formation and then they said that they would cross up there in Šantićeva in this and this spot, I don't remember exactly where. Crossing over the Old bridge, I think it was Muja Isović with his formation and in the place Donja Mahala, Salče was his name, Salče I can't remember, he was the commander of that formation down there, said that he would cross from Donja Mahala onto the left bank and he said exactly the spot from which he would cross. He asked me where I would cross, I said I would cross at Cernica at my locality, but the exact place of crossing...that I would not say where I would cross exactly, at what spot. But that I would when I crossed over to the left bank, that I would make contact from there and that I would tell him. He was not happy about that, he insisted a few times that I tell him the spot of my crossing, I didn't want to.

You probably had a reason why you approached the situation in this way?

Yes, and you will see that in this number, you will see that. Then that is what I, in 1992 said in those newspapers as well. And then when he had overdone it with his insistence, he had forced the issue as it were, of course my second in command told him we would not tell him, that regardless of his insistence that we would not tell him, but that we would cross and then that we

would call him. And then talk about this stopped. Then we returned, we all had the responsibility of organizing the crossing however we knew best, there were no instructions: “Somebody will come, and they will transport you over, then only you will go...”, but rather we organized ourselves, from the boats, to the way in which we would cross, from...very, very difficult in such a short period of time and in a very primitive way to cross the Neretva, which was very big at that time. Then, with my second in command and other close collaborators, I made a plan for a number of people, older people, not to cross the water. I left them, some 30 or so I left along the bank of the Neretva, on our bank. I chose 26 or 27 people to start with me over the water, and of course later we would be added to by some other formations, but we would be the first, the initial ones to go there. Then we started off, it was something like 15 to 3, in other words, midnight had already passed, 15 to 3 of the next day, it was dark of course, it was nighttime. None of my collaborators knew the exact spot of our crossing, a small number of people who were to cross knew, who would stay behind to protect us if something complicated our crossing, that they could fire along the left bank until we returned, because we were entering into the unknown. So we organized it in that I would cross over in the first kayak, because I found a kayak somewhere, I managed to find an old kayak, that I would pull over the first rope and when I crossed the end of the rope, the end of the rope that would remain on our side they would tie to a boat and I would drag it across and in that way I would again, as we mentioned earlier, transport an allotted number of people. And when we started off, of course, from the spot that was the easiest, they thought that we would cross there, that place was known in Mostar under the name of Bunor, that was under the cinema “Stars”...

Bunor?

Bunor, where there was a police station before the war, one of the police stations in Mostar, there were two before the war, one was there where it still is, the second was over there in that spot or where the House of reconnaissance once was. And in that area the Neretva is the narrowest in all of Mostar, the narrowest and most tame.

It was logical...

It was logical to cross the Neretva there, in that we had attempted to cross there about twice before and crossed, but we went no further, we only went there to the banks, crossing. So there was logic, and of course it was the simplest and easiest to cross the Neretva there, but I chose another crossing, of course not one of them knew, not even my deputy commander knew, and that was the crossing under the destroyed bridge, under the destroyed bridge on the Musala, Tito's bridge, which was destroyed a few days earlier, mined. So, under the bridge, maybe 15 or so, maybe 20 meters under the bridge, where, because of the bridge, there were enormous, huge waves, the destroyed bridge, and even if it wasn't destroyed it is very difficult to cross the water there and it was very unexpected, the surprise factor was crucial there. I descended with about 10 to 15 people onto the bank. I sat in the kayak, of course I put on the bullet proof vest and I rowed across the Neretva somewhere around 3 o'clock and a minute, in military style, exactly as it was said that we would start to cross at 3 o'clock. The order was to start crossing at 3 o'clock. Somewhere in the middle of the Neretva I sensed that something was occurring behind my back. There was some sort of light, but I did not turn around, that was not even a concern. Some 300 meters behind me, 200, 300 meters I sensed that something was occurring, but I did not react. I rowed across the Neretva under the city pool "Banja", that is the closed city pool, directly adjacent to the bridge. I exited the kayak, pulled on the ropes and transferred the first few

people, it was a small boat, only two men could fit. I transferred them over two by two and then when I transferred over a certain number of people, then they took over the transferring of people and after I did not do that anymore, but a few, a few of them I drew in by myself, because I was the only one, the only one of the left bank, there was no one else. We transferred all the people over and when we had gathered everything then I split them up according to who was to go where, which groups through those streets, small streets, which emerge up into Feićeva street, where it is now a pedestrian zone, and when we split up into two groups, I led one, and the second was led by my deputy commander and then we set off to go up there. I left two men down there so that they can give strength to those who were coming, in order to transfer them over. Now I expected that these others have crossed to the left, these crossed to the right and so I expected as was agreed, at 3 o'clock we were all supposed to have gone, on all 4 crossings and these who were coming in tell me that at exactly 3 o'clock and a minute or two, when I was in the middle of the Neretva that a flare had been launched, that is what I sensed that something was happening behind me, but I couldn't have known, that from Bunor, where the police station was situated – and that they saw certain people up there walking with weapons, because you could see that over the water, it wasn't far. And then I realized that they were expecting us there, that that crossing that was most logical and normal and the easiest in that area, that our crossing was expected in that place. And then some of those suspicions I had were confirmed, and then thanks to that instinct I changed, without, without, no one ordered me, no one told me where I should cross, no one was looking from me to “cross there”, I organized it on my own and on my own instinct I chose that upper crossing, that was difficult, that was impossible, that was the surprise factor, it was simply abnormal to cross the Neretva there, especially when we were

going over fully equipped, because you are going into an attack and later I hear from one guy, the definition later when it passed, he says: “The crossing of a river with the tendency of crossing into an attack is one of the strongest battle operations.” Why? Because you go under fully loaded battle equipment, you are carrying at least 30 kilos on you, from weapons to ammunition. So that place was difficult, it was dangerous, but it seems to have been the only place that would have allowed passage.

What happened with the rest?

No one else crossed over. This group in Šantićeva did not cross. They started off on the Old bridge, one was killed, one was injured. One was certainly killed, this one was injured, I don't know if he survived. In Donja Mahala, this guy understood seriously, just as I had, that he had to cross, that Salče, but he said where he was crossing, so they waited for him somewhere around the Tobacco factory, because down there in that direction when you cross, you go toward the Tobacco factory, they waited for him down there and he was killed. That is when that commander Salče died. And the entire formation retreated, they returned to the starting position, in other words they returned to the bank of the Neretva, some managed to transfer back, those who couldn't manage stayed down there by the bank, so they practically did nothing. Many of them jumped into the Neretva to swim over, to save themselves, maybe someone perished there. Of those four crossings in the city, the only one that functioned was our crossing and the entire army, the entire army that was supposed to go, this 4 times by 100 plus 30 army police officers each crossed on our crossing.

All of them later crossed there?

All of them crossed at that crossing...

When? How long did it take them to do that?

Well, look, that lasted until sometime around noon and only around noon when we came to the Old bridge, in the hours before noon, when we came to the Old bridge Kujumdžiluk, down there in this old part of the city, that is when our people were firing at us from the right bank, they thought that we were četniks, because they hadn't crossed. And then when we informed them that we had crossed then they did over the Old bridge, because we were in Kujumdžiluk, in the old part of town, but they were firing at us, because they did not know, because they did not cross and therefore didn't expect anyone to have been able to cross. In other words, what I want to say is that there was no coordination, and only after we barely somehow managed to inform them it was us, did the firing stop and then after that there were crossings over the Old bridge. So, that was about a few hours after us. And the entire army, that first some sort of, that first echelon crossed over on our crossing. Not on these 4 as was planned, but only over one, because these others were not formed.

Alright, now was that some sort of instinct or did you have some sort of information which resulted in your not wanting to say where you would be crossing?

I didn't have any information then- it was simply instinct and I simply could not understand why Arif was so forceful in wanting to learn that information – and because he was so forceful I suspected I shouldn't tell him.

That is when it became suspicious to you?

That is when it became suspicious to me, yes. There was no information, it was simply suspicious to me. And the more he insisted, the more I refused to tell him. And in the end, it turned out that it turned out alright, much better than if he had probably known.

Was it later learned, was this event brought to light later?

No.

You never found out what...?

No one ever really even spoke much about that, nor...it was simply like that. That day sometime, here this will be interesting for you, and maybe we can finish this section with this, that day at about 6 in the afternoon at about 5, 6 o'clock, I was looking from him to have the command center transferred to the left bank. The command center of our formation. He didn't want to. It was so...

Are you speaking about Arif?

About Arif, I am speaking about Arif. He didn't want to. He didn't want to transfer it and then on the insistence of my colleagues, who were also Muslim, and Miro Kajan and all these others, we went to him in the command center and we told him if he does not cross in the next hour with the command center that we would pull the army from the left bank. The army cannot be over there without a command center, without control. And after that he transferred one part of the Headquarters, he transferred it immediately along the bank of the Neretva, he did not go deep, he transferred the Headquarters into the first house along the Neretva. So he was practically talked into transferring against his will that day.

Well, how did Arif Pašalić react in these types of situations? He was pressed by your demand, it was not really something he wanted to do – what was your impression of him?

Look, he simply kept saying that it was not safe over there, that it was not yet time, that we will see what happens, he weighed it, and weighed it. I cannot say what, but he probably had information, I did not have any information especially concerning politics. That did not interest me then, because we somehow managed to instinctively organize, rather than politically, that's how it was. And as far as politics was concerned he probably had those ambitions, which was later seen, so maybe that was the reason for what seemed to be the weighing then, when we were to transfer, where we would transfer, why we would transfer, would we at all. So there was a bit of debating. And he crossed. He crossed then, but in the evening. So that part is very interesting, but it is true.

Tell me, you mentioned this meeting that occurred immediately before the action...

At 12 o'clock, sometime around midnight.

Around midnight, at 3 o'clock at night the Neretva was crossed. You say that Pašalić then said that he was at a meeting in the HVO Headquarters is that right?

He was in the Headquarters, that is right.

Did he show you some sort of paper, did he then...?

No, no. Not to me. However...

Who was present at that meeting?

Well, there were the commanders of these formations of which we are speaking, who were supposed to cross the Neretva and his inner circle of people in the Headquarters.

And what did Pašalić say, he was in the HVO Headquarters, and I seem to remember that you mentioned that Praljak was also there...?

Yes.

Rather, that he said that he was also there with Praljak.

That's right.

Did he say anything...?

I cannot know that time when he was with him, but he did mention him.

And he mentioned, what, that he...?

That there was a plan to liberate the left bank, that he got the plan that the Mostar battalion was to liberate the central part of the city, in other words, this part of the city about which I spoke, where there were needed 4 places to cross and that that would be entrusted to the Mostar battalion. And that on those 4 spots there would be an organized transfer, that we would do that, and that the remaining part who would cross south on the Buna and north up there we did not discuss that, because he was not responsible for that zone. But I was diving up there a day earlier, so through experience I knew the surroundings. Slavko Puljić was up there and the formation from the MUP so I knew that they would be a crossing up there too, because I went up there to dive under that bridge.

Did he then say anything else about that meeting in the Headquarters?

No, no he did not. He didn't, he didn't. Honestly though, I was a little, because I was in a situation that did not allow me easy access to the command center, the Headquarters, so I was a little late. That part of the gathering, I was the last to arrive, me and my deputy commander, so in this first part, I don't know what they were talking about, but this that we were to cross, that we were to go liberate the city at 3 in the morning, that the central part of the city would work in that way, but nothing was concrete that someone would organize the crossing and that we would just cross, rather we had to organize ourselves and create a crossing, we started off and that's that. That is that one.

This last one is the most interesting, and I have a witness to this, but I have to ask him if I should mention him. He is Muslim, that is why I am saying this.

It would be very beneficial, very beneficial if that man could verify this.

That is right. I remembered that this morning.

You see how good it is to speak like this...

He will, he will, he will do that, I just have to...

Let's try to speak in detail a bit: it is the 8th month 1992., is that right, if I remember correctly?

I think it was the end of the 8th month, I think it was the end of the 8th month.

8th month of the year 1992?

The year 1992.

What is happening in the 8th month of the year 1992? What is the event about which we are speaking?

Then there was no war in Mostar. The lines were up high on Podvelež, it was very far removed.

And what was the atmosphere then like between Croats and Muslims?

Well, it was already then probably, it was already boiling, there was already that politics about whether there would be negotiations, would there be... All together, but there already existed some bigotry there and Arif then offered me...he came to my apartment...

So, who came to you?

Arif came...

Pašalić?

Arif Pašalić, Kajan Miro, Miralem or Miro Kajan. Later he was at Tuta's, Juka Prazina killed him, that is that event, but maybe that is now unimportant.

So Arif Pašalić came, Kajan Miralem...

And there was one more, I don't know his name, his friend, I think it is Lerić, but I am not sure, that Lerić is his surname. You can write it down and then we can verify it.

Lerić.

And that is when Arif offered me...

Those three men came to you in...

They came to me in my apartment, those three came to me. That was in the afternoon, somewhere around 5, 6 o'clock. And that is the first time I hear that some larger formation was to be formed, because in the meantime they had already formed another battalion of Muslims from Gacka and the rest of these who were arriving.

You are speaking about the refugees?

Of the refugees and the remaining through the mobilization that they created, the remainder of the people. In other words, they had already formed a second battalion. Now I do not know who this commander was, that you will find in the newspapers, who was the commander of that battalion. I think the majority were these Gačans from above, who were displaced and then of course a need arose to form something in order to conjoin all that, that is the brigade and that it band together with Konjic, up there with Bosna. And that is when he offered me that I – and at that time I was not there, I was already out, but they probably needed a Croatian to be at the head of that, in order to have a cover. Then he offered me that the position of commander of the brigade, and that he would take over the corps, 4th corps, which did not exist here. None of this existed. This is yet to be. This is still yet to be.

Therefore, if I understand correctly, that afternoon in august of 1992 you heard for the first time that the 4th corps was to be formed...

The brigade.

That's right. But...

But there will be more of them in the corps where Arif Pašalić will be the commander of that corps.

That is when you first heard that Arif Pašalić..

...was planning, that's right.

He was planning to be the commander of the 4th brigade.

That is correct.

And inside that would be a brigade, you were offered...

The position as commander of the brigade.

Commander of the brigade. And how did the remainder of that conversation go?

Well, of course I was confused, it was a little strange, in that...then I said that the Serbian formations were far from Mostar, that there is no war in Mostar, that civilian life had started in Mostar, that there was no necessity to stir up conflict again when this part is clean, one can live, already refugees are slowly returning, it had already started, refugees from Croatia are returning, the houses are already starting to be renovated, to be made, in other words, life had started up – and why do you need another army when this one had finished its job?, why form another army? Then he told me, this which I repeated earlier, that, that he wants to liberate Mostar of the HVO.

That is what Arif Pašalić said?

That is what he said to me. Yes. That is what he said to me. Then I said that I did not have any desire to be in the army, the police interested me, which is true, I was in the police later, I was already in negotiations with the police and so on.

And these two men who were also present...?

This Miro was killed. That I know. After that he had been at Tuta's, he transferred over to Tuta, he was in the "Kažnjenička Bojna". Miro Kajan.

Were they surprised then or did you have the feeling that they came...?

They came prepared. They came prepared. Because Miro was my soldier before, he was my aid, one of my aids. I had the feeling that they had already spoken about that and that they had come to talk me into it.

Did they talk you into it then?

Well, they did not talk me into it in the way of coaxing "come on, you have to be, you must be", but rather "It would be good if you were to take this on, it would be good, you come from Mostar, people know you, you were the first to cross the Neretva, authority suits you well in the army sense, war, not army," since I was not a soldier before the war and, the climax of it all was when I said: "Why do you need that?" When he saw that I was subtly rejecting it with counter-questions: "Why do you need the Army, why do you need another army when there is no more war here!?" - and then he probably saw that I did not want that. As soon as someone asks

questions like why do you want that probably indicates that one is looking for a way to reject it and then he said to me: “To liberate Mostar of the HVO!”

Did Arif say that emotionally, was he angry when he said that, did you get on his nerves with your...?

Well, look, according to me he already had an unbending position that that must be done, with or without me, but I was probably the best fit because I was from Mostar, people knew me, many people knew me, because I was a Croatian and as a cover for that Army, that brigade, to say, “Here, see, it is not only muslim, but there are also Croatians!” and that is how I was nominated into that position by him. According to me that was the reason. Of course, I rejected that. Afterwards, Hujka came into that position, this Hujdur. They placed him into that position. I think that is...But the dates need to be arranged, need to be seen...

How much time after that, did the 4th corps become realized and function in the way in which it was imagined?

Well, that started very quickly I think. They banded that together in a few months. I think it went quickly. In any case, they probably had some political support to do that, because he would not have been permitted, nor would he have dared to do that.

Judging by your conversation in the 8th month of the year 1992 they had their own goals already defined by then?

Well, they had already determined that they would do that.

Rather, the reason for the existence of the 4th corps was tied into the existence of the HVO and this which you have told me?

Well, probably to counter the HVO. That is what he told me. That is from his mouth into my ears.

And then into my dictaphone.

That is true.

Alright.

It doesn't matter. That is the truth. Dates, dates, I can't now remember since I didn't...

Do you think that there could be more witnesses who could confirm this story?

Well, this, this I think could be the witness. This which I said at the end who was in my apartment. I think that could be a witness. Dates, the dates now I cannot, that you will find, all of that you will find over there in, because then they wrote in "Jutro", that is how the paper was called "Mostarsko Jutro", whenever anything was formed it was published.

How often did that "Mostarsko Jutro" come out?

Maybe once a month.

Once a month?

There, you will see by the dates there.

Alright.

You will see by the dates.

Have we said everything that we...?

Well, I think that we have. I think we have.

Thank you kindly.

November in the year 2005, Ljubuški