

TIHOMIR GORŠA

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May 24th, 2005

Sunja

The voice recording and the transcript of the interview are recorded on the CD
marked as follows

SUNJA 2.

The voice recording is registered as follows

tihomirgorša

10.0 MB

duration – 31:18

The interview was conducted in Sunja, in Damira Gorša's house

It is turned on now. At the beginning please introduce yourself.

Tihomir Gorša.

Time and place of birth?

March 12th, 1962, Sisak.

Sixty ...?

Two.

Two.

Yes.

What is your occupation?

Veterinarian.

Veterinarian?

Yes.

You were here before the war? Doing that job?

Well, I was working for three months before I went to America. I got married there, and I returned when the aggression started. Actually, I returned a little earlier, I came back in July. Sunja was not attacked yet.

July of 1991?

Yes. I was in Varaždin on July 27th, when Sunja was attacked. I got there on the 29th, two or three days after the attack, after I returned from Varaždin. There was no transportation, and so... In Zagreb I found people that were transporting the civilians, I found a man who got me across to Sunja, and so I came.

So, you came to Sunja...?

Yes.

And got involved in defense actions?

Yes, yes, yes.

What was the situation as you arrived in July? What did Sunja look like?

Sunja was... Of course, it was completely different from what I... Well, of course it looked different than I... different from how it was when I was leaving. Police was already performing some kind of patrols. They organized night patrols in different villages. I was meeting different people, I wanted to say hello to everyone. Then I went to Zagreb, Varaždin, to greet everyone there. After that I came back and the situation was not... they were under an actual attack. A defense line of some kind was formed. I got involved since I was, considering my *** as a medical orderly while serving the military duty. Later on, since I was a trained veterinarian, my brother suggested that someone should organize the medical corps. But on the front line, because no medical service was organized here – there were medical teams and local physicians, but there was no one to take care of people on the front line, to provide some kind of a first aid. To *** the wounded people, so I got involved in that. And it was quite successful too. I would supply the material, medical material and so on. On one occasion I even delivered the first uniforms, the uniforms we were wearing then. Praljak was wearing some kind of trousers then, hiking trousers.

You remember him wearing that?

Of course I do. I told them: "OK, now we have a size 60 uniform. That's a big one, it's huge, so let him wear that. That way he will at least look like a soldier."

For how long was he wearing those famous hiking trousers?

I don't really know, it was not for long, because we got our uniforms in a short time. There were not many of them, some 40 or 50 uniforms. But they were real guardsmen's uniforms, olive green. We would have more or less success, depending on how the situation was developing. But still, an independent battalion was formed. Later on the service was organized. In February or March

of 1992 the need of a veterinary service became apparent, that is, an inspection. Because at the same time I was also performing the inspection of the food that was being prepared for the army. Because we lived on what we had there, there was practically no backup...

It may sound silly, but we really needed to be self organized to a great extent. You know, with people from the village ***, from the village we had to *** cows and pigs. That was actually... intended to feed people. Because, of course, everyone left their homes, and those who stayed were stationed on the positions and could not do that, so we organized the food preparation in a very short time. That is what I would normally do. And then in 1992 I was working solely on that. I stopped performing duty of the chief of veterinary service *** later on... By that time, the 165th Brigade was already formed... until October of 1992 I was the chief of veterinary service. After that I left, because there was no veterinarian here. There was one medical orderly, but no veterinary service. Because we wanted to have some sort of civilian life here. So I rejoined the civilian veterinary service and I stayed there through 1993, to the end of 1993. In 1994 I joined the army again. People got quite organized here, you could even find a veterinarian. I took the position of an instructor in Sisak Operational zone (cro: Zborni mjesto Sisak) to *** food of animal origin. To monitor the warehouses and head the veterinary services at the 57th Brigade, which was in Zagreb Operational zone (cro: Zborni područje Zagreb). That was my *** there, and so on.

Fine, let us go back a little, to the very beginning of the war events. You said you arrived to Sunja in July of 1991...

Yes.

The situation was, I suppose, quite disorganized *....**

Right.

Defense only started to be organized, is that correct? From the beginning you had to deal with the dead and the wounded? You started immediately?

Well there were civilians at first, and the dead... From the shelling, there were also those wounded, they had to be transported. We needed to...

You did all that?

Myself and other people. Not only me. A lot of us was involved in that. You know what? People proved to be very capable, those who stayed here. Because it is impossible to be in all the places all the time. If someone got wounded, there was always someone to provide the first aid, someone who knew how to react. So I think we were quite good, we did not have any loses caused by negligence or similar... Our people were well trained. The only problem we had here was that local people got organized in a way, and we were getting help from the reservist units of MUP (cro: Ministarstvo unutarnjih poslova; Ministry of Internal Affairs). The Guard elect-unit arrived, there were not many of those guys, around 30 of them. They all had to be organized with the locals. There was a need for a mediator, someone to interconnect these groups of people. And that was something that, by my judgement... it seemed like it was poorly done, because...

Why, **?**

Because people, and I am talking about 1991, yes, we are talking about the starting activities and the fortifying of the defense of Sunja, the entire first line of front in Sunja. It was spreading from Strmina up to...

****?

***, yes. Somehow we managed... to connect the locals with these guys arriving for backup. They brought some things with them, thing of their own even, especially the logistics. Because locals here, they were more or less... it can be said that until the end of 1991 they were on their own. They had to manage and provide weapons, ammunition, and... they showed the will to stay. It seemed to me, an outsider, that no one was interested in Sunja, you know. That no one was really interested and... OK, if it stays, it stays, and if it falls, we will *** the line on the opposite bank of Sava. So people here, on this side, were showing a special kind of enthusiasm. I believe that is the mutual thing between Vukovar and Sunja, people did not give up like in other small towns...

Tell me, as Praljak arrived in early September of 1991, did you ** **?**

Yes, of course I did.

What was the cooperation?

It was excellent. Actually, he didn't interfere with anyone's job. He had other things to do. He could not get involved in medical corps, or, I don't know, the veterinary service and different... logistics. He was doing his job, at least as far as I know: to reinstate resources to *** groups and to *** the line ***. That was his intent. What was his individual achievement, and to what extent people on these positions helped, it is not for me to judge. I am not competent enough to

make a judgement on his role here. I only know that he was involved in that and that it was his goal to *** the line together with other people and other settlements that shared the same goal. In the Headquarters, he was someone coming from outside, and in a way he was the one who was always present in the Headquarters. Because, you know, we had a problem with the commanders of different segments of defense – these were people you could not find at a certain organized place, like a headquarters, they were always around, always *** on positions, they were not bureaucrats, nor they were military experts able to develop any plans. They were more involved in defense activities and in some way they felt they needed to be there, providing support to those people. As a commanding officer, he appeared different, he sounded different, and I think that was good. Him coming was a good thing, because he was... He could focus on people. And everyone was relieved that they now have someone to do that, which enabled them to...

But apparently Praljak would also leave, he was no person to sit in his office, he was quite active in the fields?

He was too, as far as I saw him... But he would leave for the same reason, first, to provide moral support to the people, and second, to probably check how people were reacting, which enabled him to maybe do more for them. I know that he would not refrain from getting under fire, but... You know, it must be said, we must be honest and say that women stayed as well. They were in basements, they were shooting, what else could they do? So women stayed, and he should be scared? It is meaningless to talk about that now. I mean, everyone who was there had nothing to be afraid of. Everyone was being shot at, and each of us had their own way to deal with that, it was a kind of stress. He probably went there as much as he needed to. To the extent which allowed him to be

present without exposing himself too much. I think he was quite reasonable in that regard.

Upon arriving to Sunja Praljak was putting pressure on people: he demanded that certain standards must be met, good quality fortifying... Did people oppose that?

There was no opposition, the army caused no problem, but our men, people who were on the front lines, those who were on the fortified front line. These positions were changing at the beginning, not much, but they were changing. In some villages they were not... I know about a problem on the left wing of defense, people were not cooperative. They were not ready to get involved, especially when that meant investing physical work. To work on things, build something, dig some earth, fill bags with sand, this and that.

To build bunkers?

Well, yes. He had to... He had no choice, he had to go out there and talk to them.

How was he dealing with that?

How was he dealing with that? You see, first he would go to... I don't know how and what he... I met the following conclusion: he would follow some sort of peasant logic – the hardest thing for a farmer is seeing that his cattle is at stake. So he would say: "Look, if you're not willing to help by investing some physical work, then we will check what you have in your stables and you will have to give a bit more for our kitchen and for... So you can choose to help one way or another, but since you are here, you must help. We are all in this together, and

you depend on us, because we are out there", so he knew well how to deal with that...

****?

Pardon?

When given that choice, were people angry?

Well, no. At first they were surprised, because none of the local commanders had that kind of an attitude, since... They knew the locals, so they could not approach them in such a way. They could not force people into something, saying: "Look, are you prepared to help or not? Don't be such a coward" and similar *** he did not have time for that, and also, he was not sentimental about it. The attitude of the local people was "that things can be done without this or that person, forget about them, we can do it". On the other hand, he was seeing it as a compact whole, something that should be shaped into one – how to say it? – into one common mass which should act jointly in defense, and I think he succeeded.

Praljak enforced the institute of detention. Are you aware, did you witness any cases that ended in sending people to detention?

You know, the detention was enforced during the formation of the military police. Naturally, there was need for military police, on an organized front line, with lists of people and lists of weapons *** places, where people were appointed to their duties. Not only because of people who were making problems, but because it had to be done. You cannot have an army without the military police, how could you? Especially in a detached region such as this.

Because the region on this bank of river Sava was isolated from the rest of the land, like an island, so it was normal to have and use such service. Now, there was a problem: who is a soldier, and who is a civilian? Because some civilians were still on their positions on the front line. Civilians who did not want to be officially included in defense activities, as soldiers. People would sometimes leave the front line to go on a leave, and then they would sing and fire their weapons – and there was always a problem...

With drinking?

Yes, to calm people down and prevent them from doing any harm or wounding others – because these people were under influence of alcohol while on a leave, when they would return from the front line. The military police's job was to prevent shooting in the town and all places except the front line. Firstly, because the ammunition was wasted that way, and secondly, because it meant disturbing other soldiers and people living in the area. People were rather unimpressed by the military police, because they were unable to make arrests. There was nothing they could do there, because groups of people... For a while they could not even approach the front line, because they were told that they had no business there and should stay away. And so it was, they had to do what they were told. Praljak wanted to make something out of that service. You cannot go there, make wry faces, and then chase the military police away once they come for you. What use is such a military police? So I suppose he wanted to make them know that this should change, that the military police will do what it is supposed to do, and so it started. After that the first drunkards ended up inside **** how to say it, those who would celebrate a bit too rough, they would end up in detention. That did not last for long. They were not, as I recall it, at first they would sit there with the members of the military police and watch television – they had to be there, so they were trying to make themselves easier. They had to listen to the

commanding officer and avoid getting in trouble, they had to... And there was no point in locking them up because the next day they would return to the front line, so they were there to sober up. They were not locking them up in cells, they would simply sit together and watch television *** when they did not want to be there anymore and wanted to leave, a record of that was made. I really don't know what was the protocol on that and how it was registered. All I know is that I walked in there several times and saw these guys watching television.

Tell me one more thing: when you were in the medical corps, dealing with wounded people...

Yes, yes.

... can you make a little comparison – I just thought of that – did you notice any difference between the period before Praljak and the period Praljak spent in Sunja, in terms of number of people wounding themselves or getting wounded because of neglect?

Well, I don't know...

Was there a noticeable difference?

I don't know... I cannot tell... Perhaps it was, I don't know...

Just to see if there were any....

I don't know.

...differences in numbers. You don't know. Good. In general, did you deal with many cases of people wounding themselves?

Well, not really, there were not many such cases, I don't actually recall anyone wounding themselves.

Or getting wounded because of neglect? I suppose there were such cases?

Well you know, people that got wounded, or killed, it would happen to them in a place they should not have been on, according to their duty – for some reason they would abandon place A, where they should have been, and go to place B, and on their way they would usually...

Get hurt?

Get hurt.

Were you there when those boys got into trouble – I don't know right now whether it was the Station (cro: Stanica) or the B52 – when that boy got killed, what was his name? Miško got wounded, and two of them got killed. One died on the spot (???), the other one on the way to the ferry.

No...

It happened in July or August.

No, no... That was when Skender got killed.

Skender, that is correct. That was in August, was it not?

I don't know. You see, the period from *** July to May 1992 was very messy for me and I keep mixing things... I was under a constant stress and simply, if someone tells me "it was not then, it was at another time", I find it difficult to find a particular point in time event to sort events by, so this is hard for me.

*****?

Yes, I was, I was taking Skender from up there.

He got killed up there or he...?

Up there, he died up there.

And Legin died on the way to the ferry?

And Legin died on the way, he died on the way to the ferry.

And Enes Sadiković, Miško, he got wounded at that occasion?

That is correct. Miro got wounded, the one from the Guard. His intestines fell out, OK he was ***.

He recovered?

He recovered, others suffered a stress and were having hearing problems for a few days because of that...

Detonation?

Detonation, anyway we arrived during the night, because there is quite a clear site at that place. Especially after they tore down that wall. You can see everything like on the palm of your hand, houses and everything. Then we had to get him down. Myself and another man, a Sunja local. We climbed up there. It was an unfinished house, there was nothing there. We climbed the stairs, *** the ladder. And then we had to get him down somehow. We could not, because the poor man was entirely blown apart. We managed somehow to retain his head, half of it was missing at the back of his skull. We took a small pillow case and put it inside. We put it on his head to prevent it from falling apart. Then we got him down. We put him on a stretcher, tied him up with sheets because he was completely blown apart. Then we took him downstairs. Slowly. So that he doesn't *** and then the car came and we...these boys. The team that was up there, they took Legin away. And I came. But no one else was wounded, and everyone left already. Only the one that got killed remained. And so I was there, as a backup, in case anything else happens. It is much easier that way, not like when there is shooting, and you must go there.

It was a difficult period for you. You said it lasted up until...?

Well, it was war.

War, war...

It is hard to say whether it was difficult or easy. It was war.

Later on, when you were doing that other thing, you said you were in the food controlling service, is that right?

Yes, yes.

So, I suppose you were not that exposed anymore...?

I was. Because I was here. Everyone here was exposed. You could not be... wherever, no matter what place, you were exposed the entire time. So, it was...

Tell me...

Actually, that was when I left. At one moment I went to Praljak and told him that I cannot take it anymore. I thought I have lost my sanity. I didn't know anymore how many wounded or dead people went through my hands. I told him that I simply must take a leave and go to Zagreb, to be away for a while. He said: "Go on, stay as long as you need. Take as much rest as you think you need". There was no problem at all. I simply came to him to ask him whether he will let me go. I came to tell him that I cannot take it anymore. What else could he do? He reacted like any normal person, the way I would also, I guess. "Fine, go, take a rest. After that, you come back". That was good, there were no problems about it. During our work together, he never... With him, I did not have a 'commander-subordinate' kind of relationship... I was doing my job well, and he was doing his. When we would meet in the Headquarters, we would... there was always people there, we were never alone. There was always some kind of a discussion going on there. People would have something to drink, something to eat, they would talk, that is how it was.

Praljak told me... There was a special reason he commended you for...

Well, I don't know...I have no clue...

Was it***?**

As he arrived, he did not arrive during winter. Right as he arrived. He was a bit unprepared. He was probably not in a good shape. And since he is tall and has problems with this spine, and he would walk around at night on uneven terrain. Things get misplaced easily, and I guess that happened to him. As I recall, he was having problems with his lumbosacral spine – and he was in terrible pain. He could not sit, lie down, or anything. Because of the muscle inflammation and the pain he was in. He was having problems with his spine before, he told me that. I found Voltaren cream, there were always all sorts of gels for muscle and joint relaxation. So I would give him a massage, rub that into his back, and of course he felt better. And he realized it does him good, that he can function – he probably thought he was not going to be able to go on. That he will have to take a rest for a few days and then... It was not possible to find rest there. Moving around those front lines... on a horse, perhaps. But even that is not certain. That's right, you have to be on foot. So, he felt a bit better when he realized he can keep things under control. I would come to him every evening, usually when it was calm. And I would give him a treatment. I don't know how many times it happened. Mainly, he was feeling better. Anyone could have done that for him, and he would still feel better. To rub in the pain relief cream. And the massage, that helps too. He was always glad to see it was helping him, since he ...

What kind of a patient was he? What is he like when in pain?

Good. He was good.

He does not yell? No cursing?

No, he was never yelling, or cursing, or... You know what? If he sees... He will probably first, I don't know, but that is... We all are more or less like that: you will talk to a person the same way they address you. If someone is acting tough toward you, you will want to show them who is really tough. If a person is acting normal, you will not go and do silly things in front of them, yell at them or do other things like that. You will communicate with them in a normal fashion. Talk to them. He was addressing people the same way, he would take an individual approach. People were not numbers to him. They were human beings, with their personal features, and he was approaching different people in different manner. I really cannot recall anyone resenting him anything. That he was...

Tell me, did you take part in the "Storm" (cro: Oluja)?

Yes.

Have you met Praljak there?

No.

You have not?

No.

Did you go to Bosnia?

No.

You did not. So you met him in Sunja and know him only from Sunja, that is all. Later you have not ...?

Only in Zagreb, after the war. We have met several times, always said hello, exchanged a few words. We always meet in a hearty mood. I mean, we spent time together here and feel connected by many things that happened during that period, even though they were not things that happened between us. The things that happened around here, all that we went through together, people develop feelings, you know? Like being from the same family. You know, you feel like these people are members of your family. That feeling. Something like that. Yes. I cannot really say that he is my friend, we were not friends. And still, I cannot say that he does not mean more to me... you know, it is like one... just as they say it ****, so that's... that is it. I find it silly how people consider someone their friend even though they met that person only five or six times. Say, I spent in that Headquarters the entire period up until March of 1992, and we were being in contact every day, working together... and yet, there was no time to work on a friendship. But of course I consider him more than just an acquaintance. It would be meaningless to say he is just an acquaintance. That's how it is.

Thank you very much. I hope I did not pester you much...

Well, I don't know, I wish I could have...

May 2005