

MILAN LELAS

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Zagreb

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The interview was conducted in Lelas's apartment

I'm turning the recorder on. Please state your name.

My name is Milan Lelas, a retired brigadier, a pilot. I started actively working for the Republic of Croatia in September 1990.

On August 2, 1991, I applied to the ZNG (Zbor nacionalne garde – Croatian National Guard), and worked in the ZNG's aviation group. So, I've started already in 1991, and in 1992 I started my additional training flying on the airplane AN2 in Čakovac in 1991, and in Split in 1992. As the Croatian Government representative I led the team in charge of the transfer of the Aeronautical Technical Institute in Velika Gorica and Pleso Airport. I spent some time working in the Crisis Headquarters for the area air-traffic control in Zagreb. In 1993, I formed the HRZ (Hrvatsko ratno zrakoplovstvo – Croatian Air Force) and the PZO (Protuzračna obrana - Air Defense) Operations Centre in Zagreb, Maksimirska Street 63; and in 1994, according to the defense minister's decision, I became a military aviation expert in Eurocontrol in Bruxelles. I held that position until the end of my career. Out of that, I spent ten months in 1994 working as an assistant for the director of area air-traffic control for military aviation. I was sent there based on the agreement between ministers Šušak and Mudrinić. In the Main Headquarters I was the head of the Military Air-traffic Control Department until my retirement in December of 2002. That's in short.

We talked earlier, and now I'm particularly interested in the story about the Mixed Air Transport Squadron. If I understood correctly, the Mixed Air Transport Squadron flew between Zagreb and what was then referred to as 'Pula'.

Yes.

Did you have anything to do with that? Were you present?

Yes, yes.

Could you tell me what did it look like? In other words, how many pilots were there? How many aircrafts? What were the missions? What was transported out and what was brought in? Could we talk about that?

Well, yes. First of all, the squadron was formed at the airport in Čepin, Osijek, where a group of agricultural aircrafts AN2 was turned over to our men in Varaždin. In Varaždin they were holed and hit by missiles; and after that, we flew with them to Murska Sobota. The Slovenians expressed their solidarity in the matter.

The AN2 aircrafts were fixed there, and then one by one they flew to Čakovec. That was the first international flight of the Croatian military aircraft.

There was also the famous airplane without windows?

Yes, yes.

You flew it?

Yes, yes.

How was it flying it?

Well, later they told me it was all mine and that I was free to take it, because they wanted to abandon it. It was no good.

All right, but it seemed everyone wanted to abandon it except you?

Well, yes.

And why did you want to keep it?

Well, I thought it was pity, nevertheless. The engine was working, it had wheels, and it had wings... However, they were holed, but...

So, it had wheels, wings and a motor – what was missing?

Well, it didn't have reservoirs on one side of the wings, because the wings were hollow. It didn't have brakes, because that part was destroyed. So, as soon as you started the engine, it was pulling to one side, and it couldn't be controlled. Do you understand? That's why we had to center the tail wheel three times while on the runway; we did that using a Land Rover in order to keep it straight. But now that cannot be done properly.

And then you took off like that?

Yes. Once it went to one side, and Rajtar was on that side, and Hrgović was in this 'Cessna'. People were looking. There was nothing to do but turn the engine off and wait for it to stop. And then the second time, we took off the third time. When we landed over there, we heard the airport was bombarded five minutes after we took off.

But you managed to save this airplane?

Yes, yes. That airplane was used later.

But how did you land without the brakes?

Well, I turned the engine off before the landing.

While in the air?

Well, yes. But that was near the ground, two or three meters above the ground. You turn off the engine, and the runway is long enough. There were no problems. But you have to fly, like this (*the interviewee draws a plunging spiral with his index finger*)

The Americans would shoot a movie based on that story...

Well, probably...

...and you talk about it like it's completely normal!

The times were like that. But, to say the truth, I forbid that... Kardinal was a mechanic, Josip Kardinal; he is alive, he lives somewhere near the airport. I told him he was not to speak to anyone about the plane we flew, because people would think we were crazy. And he said 'I understand!'

All right. That's how we get to... This was an introduction to our story?

Yes, yes. The squadron... There is an order for forming it...

May 5, 1992?

Yes. Joso Hrgović became the commander, because he had war experience from Slavonija, Vukovar, and so on. The squadron included an air-tractor – an agricultural aircraft and 'Casa' allegedly bought by the Bosnians. And that was the squadron.

Could we precisely name the aircrafts available?

Well, there was the AN2...

The AN2?

Yes, the AN2, 'Casa' and this one...

The air-tractor?

Yes.

So, that was available? You worked with that?

Yes, but there were more of the AN2s.

How many?

Well, I think there were four or five, something like that. Maybe even more. Joso has more information.

So, those were the aircrafts. And how many pilots flew them?

There were about ten pilots.

And what was exactly being done?

Anything the fighters or the people in Bosanska Krajina and Cazinska Krajina needed – we flew everything. From clothes, ammunition, paychecks, supplies for the medical corps, anything that was needed.

Did you know what you were carrying?

Well, yes, yes. It was no secret. It was loaded in your plane and you could see it. Or, let's say, you were handed the envelope containing money and the instructions 'these are paychecks you need to deliver there and there'. So...

Who received it mostly in Čoralići? It was delivered to Čoralići?

Yes.

Who accepted it there?

Well, it was accepted...It was known exactly... People were informed about the airplane arriving and delivering certain supplies, so certain people would come. It was all done incognito. It was regulated by special channels. We, being crew members...we didn't get too involved.

I've extracted some quotes from my notes. For example 'we flew for the Territorial Defense, the Muslims, and a lot more than...'

Yes.

Based on what did you know for whom you were flying? Did you receive information about it? How did it function in practice?

Well, look, I don't know the details, but you could easily tell those people from Bosnia. The way they talk or certain emblems they wear, so you know who is who.

Did they wear uniforms?

Yes.

Army uniforms?

Yes. There were those who wore uniforms and those who didn't. Those who did and those who didn't.

All right, and those who wore uniforms – what emblems did they have? Do you remember?

Oh, I don't know.

You don't have that information?

It was a long time ago. I can't say for sure.

One of the notes says that the paycheck money was transported, and that there was over a million marks, that the plane was 'loaded with money'

Yes.

Who flew that time? Who was the pilot?

Well, Hrgović flew.

Was that the only flight like that or there were more?

Well, there were more, because the paychecks were delivered on a monthly basis...

So, it was regularly delivered?

Yes.

Who gave that money?

Now you're asking me a lot. I don't know that. I would tell you if I knew, but I don't.

So, we have the money that was there. How did that money reach you? Who delivered it to you?

Well, ok, Hrgović will do a much better job explaining those details. It was directly handled by him and his men. I was never present. I never saw it. I only know the man was handling it.

All right. You flew to Ćoralíci – referred to as 'Pula' in the documents.

Yes.

And when you returned, you brought – what? I.e. whom?

Well, it depends. We brought the wounded, and certain passengers.

Who were the passengers? Who were the wounded?

I couldn't say that.

What was the criterion for choosing people who were to be flown by the aircraft and returned?

Well, the criteria were set by those who determined the flights. They were not set by the crew.

So, you would just get a certain number of people you were supposed to fly over to Zagreb, Pleso?

Yes, yes.

That's where they got off...

Yes, that's right.

Who took care of them from that point?

Well, the medical corps.

The medical corps? All right. The notes say 'returned women and children, 80% of Muslims', and also 'a hundred tons of missiles'. Do you know anything about that?

Well, I do.

What was it? What kind of cargo was it?

It was returned?

Yes.

After the liberation of army warehouses in Bosnia, the ammunition, grenades and everything else found there was given away. It was given away to the Muslims and the Croats. Now, depending on who needed what or who thought they needed it, it was transported to Croatia.

Personally, two or three times I also transported those big bombs – we called it 'krmača', 7-2 (???) - I can't remember whether it was from Pleso to Lučko or from Lučko to Pleso. I know they were so big that only two of them could be loaded into the AN2.

So, that was the ammunition taken from the army warehouses in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

If I understood you correctly, we could say that a part of the ammunition went to Croatia?

Yes, it did, it did.

So, regardless of its origin, a part of the cargo delivered to Bosnia from Croatia was in the form of money, weaponry, ammunition; it was transported from Croatia to Bosnia, where it was turned over to the Territorial Defense, i.e. the HVO (Hrvatsko vijeće obrane - Croatian Defence Council). Is that correct?

Yes.

And when you returned – please, let's just summarize it – when you returned, you flew mostly people – women, children, the wounded, and based on the criteria that wasn't clear to you, the crew...

That's right, it wasn't clear...

And there was also weaponry, ammunition...the missiles are mentioned. So, that was flown in too?

Yes.

Were you on any of those flights?

Not to Cazin.

No? So, you weren't directly involved?

No, I was at a completely different place at that time, but I knew what was going on.

All right, all right. People that were there...

Yes?

...by first and last name – who were they? So, people who were directly involved, the crew and who could be possible interviewees later, who were they?

Well, as I've said, Josip Hrgović has the list, because he was the squadron commander, and besides him I know for sure there was Žagar, then Markač, Lalić... Why can't I remember it now? There were five or six more of them. I can't remember it this moment. Maybe I need some time, but Josip Hrgović has all that documented and he knows every man. There were also two or three Muslims who came to the squadron for the training, and they trained on the AN2 and 'Casa'. Afterwards, they even flew to Cazin by themselves.

Tell me this...those Muslims that came, that finished the training over there, they were not members of the Croatian Army?

No.

They were members of what?

I don't know. They came as... We all regarded them as our men in Bosnia.

But we don't know if they were members of the Territorial Defense or the HVO?

No. No. We weren't interested in that. Our task was to work with them.

So, Mr. Hrgović could say something about the training of those Muslim pilots?

Yes. I mean, you should talk to Hrgović about the overall activity of the squadron, about all the details, because he was the one receiving direct orders, and he knows all the details because it was his official duty to know them. I know he knows it, and I know he is willing to talk about it.

Could we now close this story about the squadron and move on to the question of Split?

Well, ok. Let me just say that that airport was built fast for those special needs. I know for sure that the air-traffic controller was Mr. Malnar that entire time.

Let's just mention Mr. Malnar in more detail. So, Mr. Malnar was...?

He still lives in Bihać, waiting for the retirement, and his sister is a graduated meteorology engineer. She worked in the Operations Centre in Maksimirska Street and I was her boss.

And now she works in Pleso?

Yes, because it was moved. The Operations Centre moved from Maksimirska Street to Pleso. She works there and you can easily reach her, as well as her brother.

So, Mr. Malnar was an air-traffic controller at the airport in Ćoralići?

Ćoralići. That's right.

And that was his job during 1992.

Yes, yes. Yes.

Tell me something, before we move from Mixed Air Transport Squadron that had flights on that relation, those flights ended by the end of 1992? Is that so?

Yes.

So, you were flying from May, i.e. June of 1992 until December 30, i.e. 31 of 1992?
That's right.

Now we can move on. We have the events in Split.

Yes.

Let's move on to Split. What happened there? What flights?

In the airport base Divulje Mladen Katavić was the commander and he used his group of helicopters, those were M18-MTV, and began flying to Bosnia in order to evacuate the wounded and ill during the conflicts in Bosnia. So, you should ask him about all the details. All the flights during that time were pretty dramatic, requesting the ultimate efforts, and they were done only by volunteers. No one could force anyone to go on such dangerous missions, but they went.

Please, M18-MTV – is that one model or two?

That's one model. It is an advanced...

A helicopter?

Yes, it's a helicopter. It's a two-engine helicopter, very powerful.

What's its capacity? How much can it lift?

About twenty men. But, as I've told you, people didn't mind the technical possibilities of a helicopter, they worked outside of it. The helicopters were often overloaded, exceeding the technical norms.

Were the helicopters flying from Split empty or they carried something to Bosnia?

Oh, I couldn't say that. You should ask Katavić.

All right. But they returned full?

They always returned full.

On August 18, 1992 you were flying the AN2...

Yes, yes.

But on the third day of training you flew helicopters?

Not helicopters...we were taking the wounded from those helicopters and flew them to Zagreb. From Split to Zagreb.

So, someone else was in charge of that flight...

Yes. Katavić's group went from Bosnia to Split...

And then you flew from Split?

Yes. From Split to Zagreb. Because the wounded were... Some of them even stayed in the hospital in Split, and when that hospital became overcrowded, they were sent to Zagreb. The more complicated cases were sent to Zagreb. The AN2s were used, but also the helicopters.

But, that means you were in charge of the route Split-Zagreb?

Yes.

That was in August of 1992.

Yes, yes.

Do you know where those helicopters flying from Split landed in Bosnia?

I know the places, but I can't remember right now. I knew people talked about it, there were precisely determined points.

What part of Bosnia?

Well, mostly the southwest part, south-southwest.

Could you please tell me where that is?

Well, from Tomislavgrad towards somewhere in the east, and between Mostar, Sarajevo, and so on.

I assume Mr. Katavić would know that?

No, he knows it precisely. Because it was known...

Yes, I suppose it had to be precise. I would like you to try to remember it a bit, I see you mentioned it, and those data are interesting. So, you were involved in transporting the wounded from Split to Zagreb. How many flights were there?

Well, I don't know it by heart. There are records in the library. I never paid attention to it, I never added it up. But there are a few of those flights that I remember. One of the first

was when we flew a young man who had been hit by a sniper and the bullet hit his cervical spine. Only his eyes were alive, he was on a respirator, receiving blood, and so on. Then I remember this one flight when the plane was full of the wounded soldiers, and we had a lot of trouble landing at the airport in Krk, because the weather was very bad. There we were brought in into the airport building where we were treated kindly, they offered us cool beverages. Then I noticed one guy saying he would like a beer, and he had no arm. Then I noticed he had only one leg hooked with those wires. Of course, his colleagues thought of an idea to bring him beer with a straw, so he could drink his beer. That... At the same time it shook me and I realized those men had a spirit that couldn't be broken – they behaved like it was a normal, everyday thing, and it was a war. We had a lot of those flights.

You flew between Split and Zagreb in August of 1992. Did you have such flights before or after that?

Yes. Well, it was often afterwards, in 1993, 1994, and so on. We had such flights.

A wounded man is a wounded man, and a wounded child is a wounded child. However, now in 2005 I have to ask you this, because it is important information to us: were those wounded people Croats or Muslims?

Believe me, we never asked that. Never.

I know. I believe that at that time it was the last thing on your mind...

Yes...

But do you have the information now, could we reconstruct and sort the information, in order to determine whether we helped the Muslims at that time? Were those actions to help the Muslims or help the Croats or... Who were we helping?

I'm sure we helped both the Muslims and the Croats.

So, that wasn't documented, maybe during...

No, no, no.

Did you have some kind of personal contact with some of those men? Did you get close to anyone? Have you exchanged phone numbers with anyone?

No.

You haven't?

No. I mean, it simply wasn't possible. There were so many... Look, we had to concentrate on the task, we couldn't allow our emotions to influence our mission, the reason we were there, to transport and get the job done.

Those people you transported – they received medical help on the site where they were wounded?

Yes.

So, they were taken care of in some camp hospitals...

Yes, yes...

So, they weren't just shot people immediately entering the helicopters.

Look, the wounded soldiers were saved from the line of fire. You pull him ten meters back and help him. So, the helicopters were immediately next to the line of fire. They were equipped for the transport, but only partially.

Were those men in pain during the transport?

Well, yes, yes. Of course, they received injections and pain medications. I didn't know it, but the pain could be seen on their faces.

The medical teams accompanied them?

Well, no. Sometimes. Sometimes.

Tell me, regardless of their nationality, were there men in those groups who were within the age range of potential military conscripts?

Yes.

So, that was also the case?

Yes.

It wasn't limited exclusively to women, children, and old people?

No, no, no. Even the wounded were in their best years to...to...to...

To get wounded?

Yes.

The data regarding the number of the flights on the relation Split-Zagreb are contained in this book...

Yes, yes...

...in this flight record. Is that so?

Yes.

All the things you cannot remember right now are noted in this book?

Yes. There you have an addendum containing the list of men who worked with me. Here it is – Raos, Kulić, Ivačić, Poljak and Šundić.

So, together with these men you transported the wounded from Split to Zagreb? Is that so?

That's right. And it was all categorized as training, because they were all trainees.

However, you mentioned another interesting fact - that it was all incognito at that time. And subsequently you found out that those flights were in accordance to the Resolution 815?

Yes. At that time I wasn't aware of the Resolution. We were just informed by the Operations Center, we were asked if we were able to transport the wounded from Split to Zagreb. Then I've made a decision that we were able to do it, even though those men hadn't finished their transition training. They were trainees.

'Transition training' – what does that mean? That they weren't...

They weren't trained.

They didn't complete the training for that aircraft type or that job?

The aircraft type.

All right. We have the Security Council's Resolutions 815, 1816...

Yes. According to those Resolutions, we were allowed to use the helicopters for the interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to evacuate the wounded and ill.

So, those were the humanitarian flights?

Yes. That was the United Nations Security Council's Resolution that I didn't know about at that time.

All right. Tell me when those flights involving the evacuation and transport of the wounded actually started, and how long did they last?

I think they started in 1993...

They started in 1993?

Yes, but I don't know how long they lasted. It was according to the Resolution, but maybe, maybe the aircrafts flew before.

This book of yours could help us try to discover it?

Well, it could. It could, but Katavić could provide you with more precise data.

All right. That means we should discover the period of the flights with the mission of evacuating the wounded from Bosnia.

Yes.

I'll ask you another thing I find interesting. So, we have the flights from Zagreb to Ćoralići, from Split to a location in Bosnia and then from Split to Zagreb. You probably know, at least approximately, what was the price of a flight Zagreb-Split?

Ohhhh...

Let's say with this aircraft of yours, the AN2.

Well, the prices were very different. But if you... Oh, I don't know. I don't want to guess because it changed two or three times, so it is very hard... However, the methodology includes the flight price calculations, a 'dry plain', a 'wet plain', a plain with a crew, and so on. It's very complicated for...

Well, all right, is it possible to find out a flight price?

Sure, even... The Croatian Air Force has a declared price, so if you want to use a helicopter for a certain purpose it can be used for, a task, then they can tell you the exact price, they can tell you the price. I don't know it, but I can get back to you on that.

Could you, please, make a note. It's interesting information we can use to create an image...

Sure. I'll get it for you.

The price of the flight that we will then multiply with the number of flights and reach some kind of, at least an approximate calculation...

Yes, but in a war that's very... All right, I agree, I will help you. I can get a hold of those prices. I don't want to guess at this point.

Reading your notes, I've come across two names I'd like to find out more about, if you can remember. Those are Suad Pašalić – Paša and Muhamed Jukić.

Yes.

Those are two men you believed in and relied on enough to include in the Operations Center of the HRZ and PZO. Is that so?

Yes.

They are Muslims?

Yes, yes.

I think they were...

I'll tell you everything. We've met in the squadron which I commanded in the JNA (Yugoslav People's Army), using the AN26. Jukić was a pilot, and Paša was a radiotelegraphist. I've known these men a very long time, they left the JNA when needed, decided for their homeland Croatia. When I formed the Operations Center in Maksimirska Street I called them to come and work there. I still trust them, and we are still friends...

They were in the Croatian Army?

In the Croatian Army, yes. The one is a colonel, and the other a major, I think.

They are still active?

Active, yes, yes, they still work. However, Jukić retired a year and a half ago, but he still works on a contract. The captain training our pilots on the AN32.

Were they involved in any way in these flights to Bosnia?

No. They never flew.

Do you think they would be interesting to talk to regarding these events?

Yes, they would. They are very good witnesses for proving we treated them as if they were born in Croatia.

Regarding the person called Cico... From the AKL Sarajevo. What is the AKL?

The airport control. The airport air-traffic control.

You cooperated with that man?

That's right.

You personally cooperated with him, you had that chance?

Yes, yes.

That was during 1992?

That's right.

Could you tell me what you worked on, i.e. what Cico did?

People from the air-traffic control in Sarajevo realized their closest possibility was to open the airport with the help of Zagreb. Cico was our guest very often. We arranged things, and the technical department took care of it, because it included technical turning on, plugging their system into ours. I can say for sure we had meetings at least five or six times...

In Zagreb?

In Zagreb. You can still find people in Zagreb who cooperated with him directly. They are Vlado Bracević, Stjepan Varga. They still work as air-traffic controllers in the Air-traffic Control.

Vlado Bracević?

Yes. At that time he was the second man in the control, in charge of operations. I don't know how it's called nowadays. So, you can also check about Cico on their side, and I know that a letter of thanks to Zagreb from the Bosnian air-traffic control hung at least two or three months on the board in the hallway of the air-traffic control.

So, the Bosnian Air-traffic Control thanking the Croatian...

That's right.

...i.e. thanking the air-traffic control in Zagreb...

That's right.

...for helping them organize...

Helping them organize the air space and open the airport in Sarajevo. Because the war was in progress. The Serbs were on one side, and on the other side there were the Muslims, Croats, and so on. They were shooting across the airport. Bosnians made a tunnel under the airport used for transporting goods, and normally, there were no military actions, but there were humanitarian flights, aid flights, medical flights, which means there had to be some kind of air-traffic control. And it all couldn't have been done without the help from Zagreb.

Since I'm not an expert, could you, please, explain some things to me.

Yes.

If you say that the air space in Sarajevo was directed, i.e. controlled, i.e. Zagreb helped...

Yes.

Is that so? Did I get it right?

Yes, it was.

What does it mean then when we say that Sarajevo was in connection with Zagreb? Does that mean Zagreb kept records of their flights? Does that mean Zagreb knew all their departures and arrivals?

Look, here's what it means... At that time, Zagreb already had an organized air-traffic control. That air-traffic control was a part of European air-traffic control, Eurocontrol. There couldn't have been any flights in Zagreb without Bruxelles knowing about it. That air-traffic control controlled the flights from the middle of the Atlantic, to the North Pole and Cairo. Bosnia and Herzegovina was excluded, because it was a war zone, so they were not part of the system. The airplanes were flying across Bosnia and Herzegovina, but very high in the air, to Istanbul and further. Now, in order to include the airport in Sarajevo into the air traffic system, it had to be linked to another one that was included in the European system – and that was Zagreb.

Tell me, was that a gesture of good will and friendship or Zagreb's official duty?

I think it was both.

Was Zagreb allowed to refuse it?

Yes, yes, sure.

It was?

Of course.

And it couldn't have been...

Without any consequences. Zagreb could have easily just refused it.

Was Zagreb in any way burdened by it?

Well, of course, it requested more effort.

Did the air-traffic control suffer greater expenses in any way?

No, the expenses were not greater, but the controllers and technicians had to make more effort.

So, the workers had to put in more effort?

Yes, that's true.

We are talking about 1992. How long did that connection between Sarajevo and Zagreb last?

I don't know, but I'll check. I called some people today who will be able to tell me that.

Are there any records, archives from that period?

You mean technical archives?

I mean the archives at our side we could use to reconstruct what was transported to and from Sarajevo, i.e. our records. Were there any daily records about that?

No. The air traffic controller had his own notes. After the flight, he would put his notes into a basket which went to the office in charge of billing. Those notes contained flight number, the aircraft type, altitude, speed and so on, and not the type of cargo. The crew had that info and the dispatcher services on airports. So, the passenger list and the cargo list – the dispatcher service of the airport air-traffic control has those records...

So, the dispatcher centre in Zagreb had those?

No. They don't have it if the airplane arrives. You know?

Yes. So, the departure airport has those, is that so?...

Yes, yes, and the destination.

This Cico, the person you cooperated with, did you stay in contact with him?

No. Not after that. That man made a very good impression on me, and later I heard he was simply removed when the Muslim side in Bosnia and Herzegovina got stronger. That's what I heard, but I didn't contact him. But as I've said, he made a very good impression on me.

And these guys, Bračević and Varga, did they stay in contact?

I don't think so, but they probably know his name and they probably have colleagues in Sarajevo who know where Cico is now and what he is doing. It won't be a problem to reach him. He is a known man.

All right. So, you said there was a letter of thanks...

Yes, yes, there was.

...that was on the message board?

Yes, yes.

Do you know where that letter of thanks could be now?

Just this morning I talked to a man present at the briefing and I will call him today. There are archives in the Air-traffic Control and it could probably be found. All the employees at the Air-traffic Control saw it, because it hung there on the message board in the hallway for two or three months. The letter of thanks where the Air-traffic Control in Bosnia and Herzegovina thanks the area air-traffic control in Zagreb that enabled them...blah, blah, blah... Do you know what a letter of thanks is?

Of course! I know what a letter of thanks is and I know that one is an important document

Yes, well.

Did I tire you?

Zagreb, March 2005.