

DR GORAN MORO

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Please, state at the beginning of this recording your name, surname, date and place of birth.

My name is Goran Moro, I was born in 1961, in Čapljina, where I attended both elementary school and high school; I studied medicine in Sarajevo, after which I got employed at the Čapljina Health Centre (cro: Dom zdravlja Čapljina) in 1988. In 1990 I got employed at a garrison surgery, where I headed the Medical Corps, and where I was in charge of the garrison surgery, till the war, up until 24. IV 1992.

At that place is where the war had caught up on you?

Yes.

Could we make a brief chronology of the events: how it all looked, what was going on during that period of time, in 1992?

The war had actually begun a year earlier: the military was bringing in goods, oil on trucks and tank lorries, from its own territories – I am referring in particular to Dretelj and here, the barracks in Čapljina. It was a public matter, agreed upon, and that's when the pressure began, the arrival of the reservists in September of 1991, peoples' riots. The then lieutenant-colonel of JNA and garrison manager of this place, lieutenant-colonel Barić, had even said it publically, that they should not have come, that there isn't anyone that needs to be defended since Čapljina had its own barracks. He was transferred soon after that, and that's when a group from Belgrade arrived, from the First Army District (cro/serb: Prva armijska oblast), that worked on the transformation of the, or should I say on the disassembling of this educational centre, since it was an educational centre.

Part of the officers and NCO's had gone to other centers, mostly to Serbia and Macedonia, while the soldiers went all over what was the then Yugoslavia. But then, a few months before that, when one group of reservists had come – that is when the first incident took place in Čapljina. I cannot recall the exact date. That was when the Territorial Defense Forces were being arranged on one side – the barracks were practically emptying out all of its capacities, armaments, equipment, so this is where approximately a hundred soldiers and some thirty officers got stationed. Negotiations, talks and agreements between the leadership of the County of Čapljina (cro: Općina Čapljina) with the representatives of the Garrison lasted for a month. On the one hand Čapljina was being lead by president Marković and Kordić, representing military was general Praljak. That was the first time I heard about him. The garrison was being represented by lieutenant-colonel Božović – in reality, it was being lead by general Perišić, and that was generally known. That is when the electricity and water were shut down, the post office and telecommunications got blocked and around 13., 17. IV is when the first armed conflict and an attack on the City of Čapljina took place, I think. After that is when the first peace talks that had failed took place, later on we'll see how that happened. The military with its gear and armaments was supposed to leave the garrison; I was present at the time while they were talking over the telephone. But, from Čapljina they requested them to depart as if in a parade, without anything, without any armaments. Now, who did the talking?, the agreeing?, essentially, no agreement was reached upon and then, after an occasional conflict, attack – some will say attacks on the barracks, some will say attacks on the city, this and that, to me who had been present at the time being, to me the attacks were on the barracks, and from the barracks one could defend oneself only if you were surrounded from every side, and so the day when it all practically got resolved was about to come: that was 23., - but let me go back a few days, a day earlier, when for the first time the representatives of Čapljina, general Praljak that is, who was a representative of the military forces

of the western parts, near the Grabovina village, had summoned the representatives of the garrison at a gate, swing gates that is. Lieutenant-colonel had suggested that I and a colleague of mine, captain Erbest should be the ones to go. We went there to talk, we met Praljak and a few more individuals, I can't recall their identity, and there was talk of us going out, and leaving the barracks. It was not the ultimate thing. At one point I had asked him if that would make us prisoners. He answered in a negative way, saying that we would be like normal people, free men.

This is what Praljak had told you back then?

Yes, back then. Captain Erbest could confirm that, for sure, that's how it was.

Did that sound logical to you?

I don't know why, but he had such an effect on me that it made me trust in him, it wasn't naïve, but he made me feel confident about him. He had a megaphone, and he practically ran his army using it – now, whether they were organized or not is one thing, but he was in control in a way. Here, in the barracks, most of them were young men, age 19, 20, a few ensigns who had spent their entire lifetimes in Čapljina, got married to local girls from Čapljina, became one with the city, and perhaps only a few were inhuman enough to want to shoot – but 97 or 98% opted for a peaceful solution, so that everything would turn out just fine, no shooting, no bloodshed, no incidents of any kind. At one point, while we were talking, somebody shot a bullet, and did it pass us by, or above us, that was the first time that we could actually feel real live shooting, I can remember clearly how sharply... Well, it's not appropriate for me to say it in front of the camera.

But it is! Feel free to say it.

Here it goes then: "What the fuck are you shooting for?!" Then they all went silent, on both sides. Those civilians, there were parents, family, friends, even

some soldiers' parents were present, I found about that later on when I went out, I saw, and I talked to them. He influenced it all, so that everything would run smoothly, so that the soldiers would go back home, so that the barracks would be emptied out peacefully, without the use of force. And then we came back...

Let me interrupt you a bit: that bullet that had been shot – where did it come from?

It was shot from the garrison.

Direction being from the barracks or towards the barracks?

From the barracks.

And that is when Praljak cursed?

Yes, but he had returned in the same way towards his, from the village that is. The bullet had not been shot in order to kill anyone, it may had been shot in the air, I don't know...

What are the elements upon which you would explain to someone who had not been present there how “Praljak influenced” the things to resolve in that specific, peaceful way? How had he influenced things?

With his energy, voice and figure. Back then, I didn't know that, but I could feel it while talking to people and getting to know them – he had authority in the military, a lot of authority, starting with his colleagues up to the very last soldier. The parents, who had been present, he would take care of them, I know for a fact that he had protected every single one of them from the other soldiers that were outside the barracks. He did not allow for any action to be taken without final agreement. Since no agreement had been reached upon that night, there occurred some heavy shooting from VBRs, artillery pieces, god knows what sorts or weapons. I was in the barracks back then, in a well protected room,

on ground-floor, the five of us were watching that sight: smoke, all over Čapljina, I thought there was not a single building left standing. And then we heard helicopters buzzing, we could hear them landing, and that lasted for some 15 minutes, 30 minutes tops. They did call on us to leave, to go, but I had decided some time earlier on that not to go anywhere, even if it kills me. All for whom I cared were there: my wife, my daughter, my sister, my parents and friends. The same goes for these others, four of them: captain Erbes, ensigns Laf, Spasojević and Đoković. After that operation, when the military... We thought that everyone had gone.

That's when a lot of people left?

Yes, everyone. Except... When we took a walk on the barracks area we reached a building where the kitchen used to be, the kitchen-dining bloc. There were 25 soldiers in the basement. I have a list of their names.

Could you state the names of those present?

They are as follows: Mišić Miroslav, Milutinović Marijan, Selbab Nikola, Zlatanović Predrag, Miličević Ladan, Gospić Radovan, Mesaroš Lajoš, Berček Atila, Juhaz Ištvan, Juhaz Robert – two brothers, Bečić Muhidin, Horvat Saša, Milovanović Dragiša, Mitrović Dean, Mitrović Dragan – two brothers, Stojanović Vladimir, Šumitran Goran, Đuranović Željko, Ilić Dean, Đenadija Dragomir, Osmani Ljuizin, Ramadani Ćazip, Strahinović Miodrag, Jurcević Goran, Sokolov Ljubiša and lieutenant Kutleša.

Those are the names of the men that had stayed with you, in the barracks?

We didn't know that they stayed.

But you found them in that room, isn't that right?

Yes, we found them there.

So subsequently the story of leaving the barracks concerns these men as well?

Yes. That night general Praljak called on us to get out using his megaphone. But still, we couldn't say for sure what had happened, had anyone come or gone, what had happened or not. I remember the weather was chilly and the night had fallen and then, around 3 or 4 a.m. we heard over the radio that a military operation took place, and then we came out before the dawn and we found them. We were thinking for quite some time what to do.

What was the atmosphere like back then, among those men who were on the other side of the fence?

It's hard to describe it in words. All five of us had our families in town, nobody had left. So, when I contacted lieutenant-colonel Božović, "what shooting on the city?", he said: "Well they're going to shoot on Čapljina now". It was not until then that I realized that the war had begun, while those women and children were in Belgrade, Kragujevac, Niš, and so on, they were practically sheltered. And then we decided to leave the barracks in one car. We broke down that fence, those obstacles and we went to the village – we saw those soldiers on the sides, nobody said a word.

Nobody tried to do anything once you got outside?

I found out later on that nobody tried to do anything because they had general Praljak's orders not to shoot. And then I came out, since I knew that village, the people, and a man came out of his house where they had been, and then I said: "Could you take me to general Praljak?"

You were wearing white at the moment?

I looked nicer: white robes, this dust-coat, pants, white shoes and a blue cape, military.

And these young men were following you?

No, they had all stayed back there.

So, you came out on your own?

I and four of these colleagues. They stayed in the car, I went inside and talked to general Praljak.

What did Praljak first say to you when he saw you?

The first thing he said? “Are you alive? Are all of you alive? Who’s there?” I said that there were 25 soldiers left and that I wouldn’t want to see anything happen to them. I hope that one of these 25 will corroborate that. We went to those four other colleagues, and he had suggested that they change into civilian clothes, jeans and t-shirts. They changed their clothes. Now, since there were present those other people as well, soldiers from all regions, some of them had suffered losses, all kinds of men – he pointed out to me that it would be best if they wore civilian clothes, we would transfer them to Metković, and then they would go for the exchange. I’ve mentioned that I met Praljak, by that swing-gate, his energy made me trust him, made me feel confident about him – I trusted him. Later on I realized that he had not failed me, neither me nor these others. They even went to work in the military afterwards. Now, you can imagine how it must have been for an ensign, who had worked all of his life in the JNA, about to retire, and is now working with the HVO as a... earning his retirement here. What I wanted to say is that he had demanded for the civilians to be taken on civilian buses to Metković. Then from Metković, if you paid careful attention to their names, they came from different places, Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia, they would be exchanged through civilian based channels. Afterwards, I found out that they got exchanged and that no one got hurt. There you go, now all I’d fancy is for some of these men to call and corroborate what I am telling you right now.

Let us see what was happening later on. People had left the barracks, they needed to be transferred by buses. Where is Praljak and how does he fit in the story? What was the atmosphere back then? Is one of the armies celebrating? Is there any shooting involved? Is it all in a state of chaos, or is it all in order?

First they entered the barracks, to demine, since all of the buildings had been mined. They cleared it from land mines and then they started clearing out the buildings and re-installing authority. There was not much of euphoria. That day I first went with Luburić, who was commanding the defense of the City of Čapljina, to see my wife and daughter, who had been in Komin.

After few days I joined the Medical Corps of the City of Čapljina, I was regularly doing my field work, working at the Health Centre (cro: Dom zdravlja). I didn't have any problems. In fact, Praljak told me that I could go anywhere I wanted, but I didn't want to go anywhere else, I didn't even want to work at what are now the barracks, precisely because of those memories. I simply thought that it would be best for me to stay with the people I had already known: friends, a lot of family, my wife's family. That is when the first brigade was formed, the "Knez Domagoj" Brigade. Praljak had influenced it a lot: he had some ideas, I think he knew a lot about how the military is organized – even though he did not have any formal military education, he had a few of those faculties, all kinds of schools. There were a lot of fine men at the beginning, from businessmen to people who understood how military organization works, how the entire system works, and it all started well. Then the brigade "Knez Domagoj" was founded, three or four battalions and logistics, and our medical corps.

Let me interrupt you for a moment, I would like us to go back to the events after the barracks were under the HVO. The buses arrived. There was a different kind of charge amidst those men that were surrounding the

barracks, there were men who had lost someone, and there were angry men, embittered men. How the men who had surrendered were treated as they were going on board the bus? What was Praljak doing back at that time?

Save for the verbal lashing out there were no incidents, precisely thanks to general Praljak.

Were there any attempts?

There were attempts, intentions, but he, I'm sure of it, I know since I was there at the time being – he had eliminated any possibility of such an event. He had done it, as I've already mentioned it before, with his vigorous actions... He was a man of authority; he was a respected figure – that is the sole reason why there were no consequences.

Have you ever witnessed a situation in which Praljak opposed someone?

Just as we were going out back then – not towards me, but towards some other guys, soldiers – two or three masked soldiers went up to these soldiers with their guns. They shouted. He pushed them back using his force.

What were they shouting?

“Chetniks, you ought to be killed, slaughtered!”

That is what they were shouting?

Yes, a few of them, a handful of them. He, along with Luburić, stopped them using force.

What do you mean by “using force”?

Using their bodies.

How?

Like this! With their bodies. Both of them stood before them saying: “You’re not going to touch anyone!”

I see. So they stood before them?

Yes.

Was there any reloading of the weapons?

I can’t remember.

Was Praljak among those men who stood and using his own body protected the men who had surrendered?

Yes, he and Luburić.

At that moment, while you were looking at Praljak, how did he seem to you?

Furious. He was furious the first time we talked since he wasn’t able to achieve an agreement, so there wouldn’t be any... There were victims, to my knowledge a man from the medical corps got killed, two or three more men got killed.

Flowers are laid during anniversaries. I know for a fact that he regretted those moments deeply, since he had been concerned about his army’s safety. He was very attached to the military. He was on the front line, never caring much about the fact that he was a general. It was a surprise for me, since I had known some other generals who were always away from the front lines, in their arm-chairs.

While he... I didn’t even know that he was a general, until I was told about that afterwards. Quite, he was an impressive man, I don’t know of anyone holding a grudge against him, I don’t know of anyone hurt by him.

Did he run afoul of these three masked men who had made a move against the captives? How did they react?

They resisted him.

What happened next?

So, they used their bodies to defend the two, three soldiers that were under attack. There was cursing involved: there was no military vocabulary at use – “I am the general – you’re a soldier”, you have to listen to me. There was no such talk! You had to be rude, you had to stoop down to their level and impose upon them your authority.

What won the conflict, in reality? Paper? Command? Rank? What was the basis of imposing...?

There was no talk of paper! Officially, he was the general, but here you could only rely on physical power. At that point is when he made me feel confident about him: he was a man who knew what he wanted, who could make people... He calmed them down – they were enraged. Believe me, I thought that anything could go down.

Do you think those men were ready to shoot at Praljak at that moment?

Yes, they were.

Do you think that Praljak was ready to shoot back at them as well?

Yes. That could have happened. Yes, it could have happened. I will never forget that morning of 24th. I can see it running in my head.

What went on next?

And then the buses, when those soldiers were removed, there were no guards, nobody was guarding us, these ensigns and the captain went back to their, and I stayed with the soldiers. I somehow felt that I couldn't go until they were safe. I grew fond of them, since they would often come to the medical corps. In the end, they were young men of 19, 20 yrs of age. They would feel safer with me around. And then, when the bus arrived, there were two soldiers escorting it and one driver, then we drove off to Studenci, where we refreshed a bit, had breakfast and then slowly drove off to Metković.

Did Praljak go on that bus?

No, he just ordered the bus to drive off.

Did he provide security for the bus?

There was security: two or three men, the driver, along with one car in front and in the back.

Were there any incidents along the way?

No, we used the old road via Gabela, and down by MUP (cro for: Ministry of Internal Affairs). Statements were made and names were written down in Metković. Nobody was mistreated, nobody was handcuffed, and the guys wore civilian clothes, so the people of Metković didn't... I didn't hear a single fowl word being uttered.

You were on the bus with them?

Yes.

All right. The barracks event was the reason why we had this interview.

Now, what happened afterwards? What did you do next?

Later on I headed the Medical Corps of the 3rd battalion 1st brigade. Every single

colleague had a battalion, and then we would form medical corps stations: from Domanovići, via Bivolje brdo, to Stolac, Rotimlje and so on. We were very well organized, we had very good and quality people working, and it was all set around the town in order to protect it from the attacks – even though a grenade or two would hit the town on a daily basis. There were a few casualties, when life practically got back to being normal. And then, with the start of June is when that big operation on Neretva took place. It was the beginning of June, 1992. The frontline was somewhere above Stolac, that is when we slowly moved towards Stolac, and then it peaceful for some time, up until 15th VIII, when there was that huge, unsuccessful counterattack. After that is when a complete brigade was formed counting some 4 000 men or so.

We have come to an end with our interview. Did you have any more encounters with the general afterwards?

Whenever the general would be passing by, he would pay me a visit at the medical corps, we would talk about many things, reminiscing those days, he would enquire about my behavior with my superiors, about the medical corps, and so on. He would visit, as far as I know, those other four colleagues as well, enquiring about them. We would talk little of the war, mostly private things.

That's it? Thank you, doctor Moro.

September 2005, Ljubuški