

NJAVRO JURAJ

Zagreb

January 2006

The interview has been recorded, recording has the
code name

njavroj.wav

13,64MB

The interview took place in Zagreb

At the beginning of the interview, I will ask you to introduce yourself. Your first and family name, date and place of birth, profession and place of residence.

Juraj Njavro. Physician by profession, surgeon. I was born on 2nd July 1938 in eastern Herzegovina. I finished my high school in Mostar, the School of Medicine in Zagreb, and upon graduation I immediately started my internship and continued working in Vukovar. I worked there all the time, until the occupation of Vukovar. After the occupation of Vukovar, with a part of the Vukovar defenders and civilians I ended up in a Serbian concentration camp. After exiting from the concentration camp I came to Zagreb, and since then I have been living in Zagreb, although my official place of residence is still Vukovar. And now, as we are speaking about events from that war period, I can say that upon arrival from this Serbian concentration camp, after recovery...and to spend just one day there is terrible, not to mention longer...

How long were you in the camp?

About a month. Of course, those who stayed longer, it was harder for them. Both life and health were threatened.

You were in Mitrovica?

Yes. In Srijemska Mitrovica and in Belgrade. After coming back and the exchange with that group, "Labrador", I immediately began helping the Vukovar refugees. From that area, eastern Slavonia, and from other parts of Croatia there was a huge number of refugees – somewhere around 400.000, as far as I remember – and they needed organized help – in terms of health care, financially, socially, and in human sense. So I involved myself in that, although I worked some time still as a surgeon. Actually, I went around visiting all the refugee associations, i.e. the refugees; wherever they were situated, and particularly those from Vukovar who were displaced on many locations.

In August 1992 were the elections. In the meantime I had travelled a lot abroad, speaking about the horrors of war and aggression on the Croatian state, and about everything that was destroyed, from human lives to material assets. In August I was on the HDZ list, so I entered the Croatian Parliament. The President, Dr. Franjo Tuđman, gave the mandate of Prime Minister to Mr. Hrvoje Šarinić. He offered me the post of Minister of Health – which I, of course, was not keen to take. But there were interventions, discussions, persuasions, and as we were still in war, and I unfortunately had war experience, I finally accepted. So I became Minister of Health in the State of Croatia, somewhere in the first half of August. Day by day, the number of refugees grew, as well as the number of those injured in the war – whether war injuries or other injuries – all in all the number of those who needed help was growing. The Croatian health services were very active in that respect, and the result was that the level of health care was up to world health standards. As I was Minister of Health, I had contacts with individual ambassadors who were at that time serving in Croatia.

Among them, there was the Ambassador of the Republic of France, Jean Marie Chenu; I also wish to point out that the first Ambassador of BIH

to Croatia was Mrs. Bisera Turković. On two or three occasions, as far as I remember we had talks regarding the following: in 1992 and 1993 while I was Minister of Health, Bosnia and Herzegovina was engulfed in war, and there were lots of wounded soldiers of Bosnia and Herzegovina. They were given medical care in Croatia, equal to all Croatian defenders, and this cost a lot of money. My talks with Madam Ambassador were in the sense that these costs somehow be compensated. And these costs were not small. If I rightly remember, they were, according to our calculations, using the methodology of calculating health care costs, somewhere between 80 and 100 million German Marks...

Were these the overall costs, or yearly costs, or...?

I think these were the total costs until that date, as far as I remember. Regardless of the fact that this was another state, we wanted to help; we were helping and providing health care regardless of the fact that it wasn't paid from BIH. And we were threatened ourselves: you know that a large industrial part of Croatia was destroyed, that the economy barely existed, and from that we had to draw the possibility, the health care, because without a good economy there is no good health care. Basically, an equal, equally high quality health care was given to all, regardless of whether these were members of the Armija BIH or Croatian defenders.

During my mandate as Croatian Minister of Health, the Minister of Health of Bosnia and Herzegovina Mustafa Beganović would come and visit me. He came to resolve this problem of non-payment of debts which Bosnia and Herzegovina had toward Croatia. In addition, BIH asked us for help, because it had not been accepted in certain important international organizations, and we were already incorporated...

Let's be specific. What did Croatia do to help Bosnia and

Herzegovina in that respect?

It certainly helped them to enter the European part of the World Health Organization, and into the World Health Organization.

It means, Croatia helped there?

Certainly.

How did it help?

Well, the Minister of Health of BIH Mustafa Beganović was travelling with us to Copenhagen. Zdenko Škrabalo, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, and I as a Minister of Health, we headed the Croatian delegation on a session of the European part of the World Health Organization, and on that occasion we spoke to the President and the leadership of the European part of the World Health Organization. It was then headed by the Norwegian Jo Aswal – and with our help Bosnia and Herzegovina was accepted in the European part of the World Health Organization. I think it was by the end of 1992, 1993. Likewise, with our efforts, it was accepted into the World Health Organization. On that occasion, a Japanese, Nakajima, the President of the World Health Organization promised that after the elections, if he is elected, he will first come to visit Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – and he actually did that. It means, we also helped here in some way.

This is 1992 and 1993?

1993, the month of June.

And thereby Bosnia and Herzegovina became – what? A full fledged

member?

Full fledged member of the World Health Organization.

What concretely did it mean for them? The war was raging, the situation was very difficult...

It meant a lot because the World Health Organization at that time was, as far as I remember, the most numerous organization in the world. The greatest number of countries were members of the Organization and by acceding you can expect help from all of them – not only in terms of medical supplies, drugs, personnel help, but in terms of pressure upon their governments to help in stopping the war, to recognize and help a certain state, in this concrete case Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was the result of our support in the acceptance in the World Health Organization.

Dr. Njavro, you say that as the Minister of Health you had contacts and you mentioned two names, Mrs. Bisera Turković and Mr. Mustafa Beganović. They represented Bosnia and Herzegovina and with them you discussed to solutions to the problem of the wounded, people who needed medical care which was provided in Croatia. How was this procedure arranged? We know that people from Bosnia and Herzegovina came in large numbers, that they were transferred by helicopters and planes, that after primary treatment in hospitals they were sent to rehabilitation centres. Was all of that agreed on your meetings: i.e., how come this functioned in precisely such a way – because it is clear that these were not individual cases, but that it was a highly organized form of help?

Well, there were discussions on how to continue what was done until then,

on how to proceed further. We said that their debts to us had to be compensated, because otherwise we could not continue working, because we would not have the money to pay for medical supplies, accommodation, not to mention the infrastructure and medical part. And it was said that attempts will be made to find the means to help, and that Croatia will then continue to provide all this medical help. Delegations from Bosnia and Herzegovina visited their seriously wounded persons in hospitals and rehabilitation centres, the wounded and civilians, and especially their fighters. This is all on record, one should look in the newspaper and TV documentation.

So, how was this problem finally solved? Was the issue of the debt between the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina resolved?

I really don't know how it all ended. While I was Minister, it hasn't been solved.

It hasn't been solved then? Does it mean that the debts toward the Republic of Croatia remained open?

That is so, yes. I presume this was somehow later resolved, but how – I really wouldn't know.

Basically, while you were the Minister of Health, it was not solved?

No.

Tell me, Dr. Njavro, 1992, and then 1993, this is the period when there were already conflicts between Croats and Muslims?

Yes.

Did these conflicts reflect on the relationship of cooperation which you are speaking about?

Not at all. Minister Beganović continued coming; we would meet and discuss, not the war events but the provision of health care as such. We continued, our southern part, from Split, it provided help for the southern part; and this part here, they were coming to Zagreb, Karlovac. It should be very clearly visible in the medical records that even during the fiercest battles between the Bosnians and the Croats, help was always provided.

I don't know if this was usual anywhere in the world that they come to another country, to a country with which they are in conflict.

Well, it is a bit odd.

A bit odd, but it shows clearly that the picture that some wish to show to the world and paint Croatia as a side which had ulterior motives in Bosnia and Herzegovina does not hold water.

I will ask you now, although I presume the answer, but let it be on record. You say that as Minister of Health during 1992 and 1993 you had contacts with Mrs. Bisera Turković and Mr. Mustafa Beganović who at that time represented Bosnia and Herzegovina, i.e. its interests. You talk to them as Minister of Health. I presume you are not talking to them in a private capacity.

No.

You are not talking privately with them, is that so? You meet

them in the capacity of the Minister of Health of Croatia.

Exactly.

Does the Croatian political leadership know of these meetings?

Of course it knows. I reported everything to the Prime Minister. I didn't ask, but I presume, when the Minister of Health is coming, I presume his government and state leadership knows of it.

So, these were no secret meetings?

No, no.

Can we presume...

Of course, we didn't meet on any hidden places, but in the Ministry of Health. It was customary for a meeting to be scheduled, then we have the discussions, and after that follow the agreed actions.

And everything that happened later, in terms of health care for the wounded, it couldn't have been done without the knowledge of the state leadership, is that so?

Yes.

And now tell me, when we speak about 1992 and 1993, were you ever in a situation that someone from this state leadership stopped or gave signals that cooperation should be severed, i.e. that the provision of help, accepting of the wounded and treatment of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina should be halted?

No. No, no, quite the contrary. Nobody ever, believe me that nobody ever, as long as I was Minister – and this is precisely that period, because in the spring of 1994 we already have the Washington Agreement – in the period of the fiercest fighting nobody ever called me, or mentioned, or hinted that this provision of help is not o.k., that it means additional costs for Croatia which itself is hardly in the position to provide the best medical care for its own...

It means, even such objective facts were not taken into account...

No, no, no.

... as the expenses that were not paid, the costs that suffocate us?

Believe me, never. Never! On several occasions I was in the Office of the President, especially when delegations were coming from abroad and they spoke about health. Never, not with one word did President Tuđman say: "No, stop, take into account that we are in conflict and it wouldn't be good...", there wasn't the slightest hint of that. Never. Neither he nor the Prime Minister Šarinić, nor anybody else. Nor was this ever a topic of debate in the Party.

I must say now, I don't know the exact day, but in any case when Goražde was surrounded and the fall was imminent, although it was a protected zone, and when the fate of Vukovar threatened to repeat itself – which unfortunately later happened, and then Srebrenica – anticipating such developments Mr. Jure Radić called me and said: a protest gathering is being organized in front of the mosque in Zagreb, in Folnegovićevo, and the President says you should go there in the name of the Party, because the representatives of political parties held speeches, address the gathering and freely speak about the aggression, about what is going on. I am sure why I was elected to speak; I think the main reason is that I came from Vukovar which was destroyed and devastated, I was the one who has been

through a concentration camp and it was necessary to warn the world again what will happen to Goražde unless appropriate action is taken to stop this Serbian, Serbian-Chetnik aggression and the aggression of the JNA on Bosnia and Herzegovina. On that occasion I held a speech, speaking about Goražde and its situation, that catastrophe is looming, just like the one in Vukovar: destruction, devastation, killing, and that all of this will continue until the world says "stop" and stops it – which unfortunately did not happen. We know the consequences.

So this was the gathering in front of the mosque?

That is correct.

And the representatives of political parties were there?

Yes.

Were any of the Muslim refugees there?

Yes.

What was the atmosphere like?

I think there were protests.

Was it a speech for the TV cameras or a speech for the people who gathered there?

A speech for the people, not for cameras. This was not organized in the studio, like a "Bingo". It was outside, a couple of thousands of persons were there, and we were in front of that group...There must be a TV recording...

These were the refugees, the displaced?

Yes, that is so. The refugees and the displaced who fled saving their lives from those areas. Of course, there were the locals too, I don't know personally where someone came from. And then, we spoke in the sense that Croatia was giving full support to Bosnia and Herzegovina in the just battle for the defence of its territory...

How did the people react? What was the atmosphere like?

It was very interesting, now that you are asking me that... Namely, it already appeared in the press and it was known that there is a certain conflict between Croats and Bosnians in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And now, one might have expected whistling, protests and the like when I appear in the name of the Croatian government or in the name of the Party...

The Party which was essential at that time...

Very essential, very strong, but at the meeting I was received very well. People accepted what I had said, because they knew that I was speaking from the heart; that I was saying what I know, what I feel and what is the attitude of the leadership; and then indirectly I represented the line of the Government.

In the preparation for the interview we mentioned the meetings that you had with the Sheikh...

Yes, I think one of the first Arab countries which recognized Croatia, if I rightly remember, was Saudi Arabia. It is unnecessary to mention what

Saudi Arabia means in the Muslim world – it is the leading country, the most important and the seat of the Muslim religion, of Muslim believers in Saudi Arabia.

While I was Minister, the Minister of Health of Saudi Arabia, a Sheikh or a Prince came to visit Croatia. On that occasion we spoke how to help Croatia and the Republic of BIH – and help was promised. I don't remember any more how exactly, in which way it was realized. After that, after our conversation, as is usual, we served lunch for the Minister, the Prince or Sheikh, in Šumski Dvor. At this lunch there were our representatives from Zagreb, Bosnians, Muslims: Mr. Šefko Omerbašić, Mrs. Bisera Turković, and I also think there was the President of the Bosnian part. I should find it somewhere, I made a note who was present from our side. From our side, apart from me, there was also Mr. Žužul, and on that occasion we talked about what would be the best way to help the one state and the other – where the representative, the Minister of Saudi Arabia promised help to both countries.

Tell me, you were Minister of Health until 1993, until which month?

Until the end of the year, I think.

I will ask you just one more thing. From the perspective of 2006... as a man who participated in these events in 1992 and 1993 – how do you look upon this indictment which tends to portray Croatia as an aggressor on Bosnia and Herzegovina?

It all seems very funny to me. You know well that in October of 1991 the village Ravno has been destroyed. Ravno is a village in which I, when I went to high school in Dubrovnik, the Classical High School, and then the last year I went to Mostar due to financial reasons. However, this Ravno is relatively close, some 15 kilometres, where I as a boy would go by foot. When there were festivities in Ravno, St. Peter and Paul, on 29th June, it was known, I walked over the hills and valleys, the Popovo polje...and then you go across Popovo polje, because on the other side Popovo polje ends, or begins in Hutovo, and ends somewhere up near Trebinje, I don't know what is the distance exactly, how much it takes you to cross it. You have to cross Popovo polje, and near the hills is Ravno. And I would go to Ravno. And, to return to our topic, this Ravno has been destroyed, without much protest from Sarajevo. If we remember well the then President of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegović said that "this is not our fight" and we will not make a great fuss around it – I am speaking freely now – "we will not get too excited and raise voices", it is their problem. Of course, it is being felt, it leaves a certain scar on the soul or at least a warning that you must take that into account.

Croatia can say that it offered full support, full support until the moment of conflict, and even during the time of that conflict. Bosnia was an island within the former Yugoslavia: Serbia and Montenegro on one side, Croatia on the other: it is surrounded. And how would they receive any kind of help if not through Croatia. Croatia was the route for humanitarian and every other kind of help. Even the weapons with which this battle was fought, nothing could have reached Bosnia, unless Croatia allowed it.

Dr. Njavro, is there anything that we forgot to say? Anything we should add?

No, I think we basically covered everything. After all, the indicator of all of this is the analysis of the efficiency of the Croatian health system where it is seen how much help was given – and it is something the Croatian health system can be proud of. And we should be proud of the fact that, irrespective of who was on which side in the war, the greatest possible help was given. This is the human part that the Republic of Croatia can be proud of.

You are speaking of health care?

Yes, of the health care. And this is phenomenal.

And human.

But the health system is not an island in state politics.

No, of course not.

So it actually means...

I wish to say that this is an indicator, and that Croatia had other intentions, and approached Bosnia and Herzegovina in a different way than some are trying to portray now.

Thank you very much.