

ŽARKO PEŠA

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The recorder is on and I would like to ask you to begin by telling us who you are.

My name is Žarko Peša, I was born on October 11th, 1958 in Imotski, I live in Zagreb, my current address is Bosanska 25. I am a retired HV (Hrvatska vojska, Croatian Army) officer, with the rank of colonel. During the war, from 1990 until my retirement, my duties were... In 1991 I was the commissioner of the Sector for organized crime at Zagreb police. When the war started, I was among the first men who led the first formations to war, to Banija, when the aggression on Croatia began. At that time, only the police was organized. There was no Croatian Army, there was the National Guard and the police force. I went to war and was there in 1991 and 1992. In 1993 I went to establish the information agency, i.e. Croatian Information Agency, where I worked all the way to 2000. I was assistant to the director of Croatian Information Agency for special operations. After that, upon finishing military academy, I was the commissioner of SIS. I have been retired since 2000, with the rank of colonel.

In 1991, when I went to war, with the first men who enlisted, my formation consisted of some 500 men who were mobilized. I went to Banija, to Sisak. In Sisak we were divided into three groups. One went to Petrinja, the other went to

Sunja and the third one to Kostajnica. Since Sunja was under siege, as a young man who volunteered to fight for his country, I agreed to go where the situation was the worst. So I went to Sunja with 120 men. I think it was on July 27th 1991.

July 27th – that was when the attacks on Sunja started?

The attacks started a bit sooner and the town was in the state of total panic, and we were sent there. I was the one who organized the defense, it was all disorganized, but we managed to get things in order and these events are more or less known to the public. We were under attack on daily basis, things were disorganized, people had no weapons, thousands of bombshells fell on us every day. We simply tried to defend ourselves with what we had.

I cannot remember the exact date, but I think it was after my short one-day visit to Zagreb, when I managed to leave Sunja for couple of hours, I came to Zagreb and ran into Praljak.

Did you know him from before?

I knew him, but that was when I saw him, and he saw me, on the Ban Jelačić Square – we ran into each other somewhere around Charly, and he asked me where I've been. I said that I went to war and he told me: «Peša, please, if you are going somewhere - take me with you. I think I should get involved in defending Croatia, but I do not want to go with some fools. I know you, so could you take me with you when you leave.» Fate wanted the things to get more complicated on that day when I came to Zagreb. The people thought that I left for good and would not come back – they started panicking and asked for me to come back urgently. I called Praljak that night and said: «Praljak, you're going to war». He had some things he had to do, but in the end he said: «Yes, I am going to war». The next morning, somewhere around 7 am, he came to Šimunska street. I took 120

policemen with me as reinforcement – something like that, I cannot remember the exact number. Praljak came. He brought some old gun that had a regular rope tied to it, and he had few bullets on him. He had charisma. He had like a literary sensibility, people asked who he was - I said that he was Hemingway. I told them that he was coming with us and that he was going to be the cook - I made these jokes about it. And that was how Praljak went to war to defend Croatia, just like all the other volunteers. So no one asked Praljak to go, he just said «I am going!" - along with me and thousands of other men - and he had this old gun that had rope instead of a belt.

We came to Sunja and Praljak immediately went to the worst possible position: the main railway station. People immediately liked him because he was extremely brave. We were under attack ever day, and the enemy tried to push through in that exact direction. If that had happened at that time... Sisak, Novska, Kutina... Croatia would very differently today. He had this authority, this strength, this attitude that was perhaps far more professional than mine – because he was old enough to be our father... People were really fond of him, he was the authority, he had this strength and he liked discipline. At that time I became the commander of all the forces in Sunja. That meant: ZNG (Zbor narodne garde, the National Guard), civilian security – everything that was organized... I have written orders that I was then the commander in chief, Praljak was mentioned in one of the orders too, as a member of command headquarters for the defense of Sunja, and I was in charge of it all.

There was constant combat, we defended the town in every way we could. At that time there were a lot of Serbs among us - people who were born there. Praljak was very tolerant about this, he was very sensitive. He never said anything about how people should be told to hate or kill because someone had a different opinion, or because someone was a Serb or a Muslim. There were Serbs and Muslims there – and everything functioned perfectly. I remember... We had sleepless nights

then and I once talked to him about how this war could end. The war lasted for maybe...

Can you remember when was it that you had this conversation with Praljak?

This conversation with Praljak took place in September 1991...

Around the time he came to Sunja?

That is right. He came there and... He was an authority and I wanted to have him near me because he was intellectually and in terms of organization, on every level... he was a very strong person, he had a strong personality, I kept him close... Not keep him, we did things together because we knew each other and then, when we would rest from all that fighting, we would sleep in the shelter next to each other. I think it was early September, we were lying in Ćuka house, on the floor, in this hallway, on the tiles and talked. I told him: «Praljak, we will end this war in ten days!» And he said: «Listen, Peša, there wasn't a single war that did not last for at least four years - and this one will be even longer. I told him: "Praljak, you are crazy! What is going through your head? We will end this in a month!" And he said: "No, no, you will see how this is going to go!» And after that he told me something I did not believe back then, but it I could not forget it... He said: «This is nothing compared to what will happen in Bosnia." And I told him: "Praljak, you are crazy, you fool, what Bosnia?!" And he said: "You will see! This war, not only this one, but all the wars that happened, that were caused by somebody's interests - those were wars with lot of casualties. I might end my career there." That was what he said back then, I remember it. But I did not believe him. And, of course, Praljak was in Sunja couple of months...

He was there until February 1992.

That is right. That is... This is what happened. I was the commander of the defense of Sunja, he took over the command because I was asked to take over the command of the airport police station because the army was there and I was supposed to negotiate with them. After I left, they appointed Praljak - I think I might even have these orders, the original ones, from that time, from the ZNG. I left for the airport, and Praljak remained in Sunja. During Praljak's command, important things were happening in Sunja. Praljak organized the defense, did an excellent job and, this is very interesting – during that time there were no murders in Sunja, no incidents... There wasn't a single violation of some international conventions, rules of conduct in war and so on. So he was one of those who actually advocated for the rules of justice to be observed, normal communication, coexistence. Which meant that it did not matter who you were and what you were, but if you lived in this country, you were obliged to fight for it - that was what he... That was his opinion, he did not care about who you were and what you were. On the contrary! We had a lot of Serbs there... We had the whole orchestra - and they were all Serbs! Maybe not all... But I think that out of the six of them, four were Serbian and they even operated the radio communication. Just imagine if we had a different attitude, what would we do? He was not like that at all.

So, after I left for the airport, Praljak took over the command of the defense of Sunja. There was some heavy fighting and some difficult moments, lot of people died then, he kept Sunja from falling. After that Praljak left, I think he became an assistant to the Minister of information, IPD or whatever it was called back then. Bobetko asked for me to go back to Sunja and I was appointed as the commander of the defense of Sunja again.

That was in March 1992?

That is correct, it was in March 1992 and I was there all the way until August or September of 1992, until the united forces came and this conflict faded away. I left then, I realized that I was no longer interested in the army and I left...

When it comes to Sunja, we have this start of the war, then there is this period of quietness – and then the events that took place during «Oluja». You saw Praljak again during «Oluja»?

I saw him during «Oluja», it happened like this... During «Oluja» I worked for the Croatian Information Agency, that was in charge of coordination of all the information agencies and was in control of everything. I was in charge of the operations and was monitoring the things that were happening back then. When «Oluja» started, we were divided into groups – I was in charge of Banija. I remember, when «Oluja» started, there were certain complications in this area. I came to headquarters one day and saw that things weren't working out: lot of people were killed and so on. Certain changes of duties took place, they removed general Basarac and appointed Stipetić, and then I realized that some people were simply lost in time and space and could not handle this situation. And when I notified Tuđman and Šušak about this, they decided to make certain changes, but, these changes included me getting orders, which I still have - signed, to join this line of attack that was going from Sunja towards Kostajnica, and towards Dvor upon Una. Naturally, after I got these orders early in the morning, I left for Sunja that same day and saw that the situation there was bad. A lot of people died. I organized this breakthrough from Sunja towards Kostajnica. Me personally. There was that Štefanek there, I think, and I saw that nothing was going to happen until I get involved in all that... I gathered the troupes and said: «Those of you who are ready to face death, come with me. The rest of you can fall out.» Out of a thousand men, there was twelve of them who were ready to face death, and

we pushed through from Bobovac towards Crkveni Bok and ***** we moved towards Kostajnica. I left for Sunja and brought a certain number of people with self propelled artillery with me. On the line towards Drljače I left with the members of my troupes who were with me in 1991 and we went through there without facing any significant resistance. We put up the flag up there, on Hrastovac, at that substation, I put it up myself - and we left for Kostajnica on foot. As soon as we came to Kostajnica, the other troupes came in too: Luka Džanko's troupes, I think they came from Novska, from that direction, and we all met in Kostajnica. There was no major fighting in Kostajnica...

Which day of «Oluja» was that?

Well, you see... I would have to look at my orders because I do not remember... The first day things got stuck... I think it was the third day. The third. After that, in the afternoon, I called general Basarac and asked him what they wanted me to do. He said: «Peša, please, go with part of the troupes to Dvor upon Una, after you are in control of Dvor, call me ***** (noise on the recording caused by a mobile phone) after which he said: «Luka Đanko will finish that.»

Was Praljak already there?

No, Praljak wasn't - I did not... Praljak did not come then, I do not remember him being in Kostajnica at the time... It's been a long time, I cannot remember everything... But let's say it was like this: we left Kostajnica and went towards Dvor, we ran into this ambush and were involved in some heavy fighting. Some 12 men were killed, I do not remember the exact number. Serbs performed a counterattack that day, that night that is, and we were stopped in front of Dvor. I was then gathering the troupes and was responsible for a lot of things. We decided that in the morning we would move forward with the artillery and

attack early in the morning. So, we entered Dvor, they did the counterattack with some six or seven tanks – then crushed their own troupes. Literally crushed them!

You saw that?

Of course. They simply crushed them, they destroyed everything, did the counterattack and held the escape route so that those men could get out. But they ran over the troupes... Mile Novaković, I think that he was with these tanks. We had one combat situation... Even from the 2nd A brigade, I remember, there were people in tanks who were killed. I was there personally. When we moved forward the next day – that was when Praljak came.

Of course, when Praljak came, people were aware of his authority. After all, he was a general, and he immediately...

Can I interrupt you for just one moment with one question. Did Praljak have any kind of command duty?

No.

How did he get there?

Praljak came as a general, to help. When he came, Praljak said: "People, you must not let something wrong happen; you are the Croatian army, we are not barbarians; please, behave according to the rules..." He stuck to them then...

That was what Praljak said then?

That was what Praljak said back then! That we were not barbarians, that we were the Croatian army, that there had to be some order – and that was what he was always about, these rules!

Just a moment, let us sum this up. First thing is, Praljak was not there because he had to be, is that so?

No. He did not have to be there. There was no reason for him to be there.

He came of his own free will...?

That is right!

...and when he came there he said... What was it that he said? He gathered the people?

No, he... When I told him that we were moving on, that we were headed for Bosanski Novi and so on, at that moment he said: «Listen, no one must do anything stupid! No one must disobey the orders and commit some sort of crime! We are the Croatian army, we will do our job, this is the Croatian border, let's fall in *****»

When Praljak said that «nothing stupid must happen» - what did he mean?

That basically did not happen either. On that line, from Sunja to Dvor upon Una, where he might have been behind us, Praljak, the parts that we went through together – no crime happened there. This interesting thing happened while we were there. We captured this Serb in one of the villages around Kostajnica, I do

not know the name of the village, and they wanted to take him somewhere, but I said: «You are not taking him, why would you take him?» This man went with us to Kostajnica. I asked him: «Do you want to stay here or do you want to go across?» And he said: «I want to go across.» I told him: «You can go.» And he crossed the bridge. Do you understand? No crime happened there

Was this a soldier or a civilian?

He was a soldier, but he changed his clothes. But you could tell he was a soldier.

And who wanted to take him?

The troops that were there. Imagine a man whose wife and child were killed in front of him. What is a man like that capable of doing? What was his psychological, physical and mental state like at that moment: his wife and child were killed, and he captured a Serb now. He was just waiting for a chance to get his revenge! It was very hard to talk to people then. There was this thing that happened... I think it was, I cannot remember exactly... While we were on our way, I gave the troops permission to rest, and when I was not looking, someone set a barn on fire. A stupid barn! I did not let them burn a single house. When I asked what has happened, this soldier approached me, and I saw rage in his eyes so they signalled me to calm things down. I told him: "We are the Croatian army, no one can do that, no one is allowed to do that, you cannot burn things." And then they told me his story so I realized why he did it: they killed his wife and child in front of him - and he had to find an outlet of some kind... It did not matter to him whether he would burn a haystack, a house, or kill someone, because his wife and child were killed! So when you take that into consideration, it was very difficult to keep these men under control. He was capable of taking a gun and shooting me, just as he was capable of setting that barn on fire. But let's say that it was one

isolated event that happened, and that I lectured him right there in front of everyone. Do you understand? That was the only such incident that had happened.

Was Praljak there then?

No, I don't think he was, but Praljak did some things in Dvor... He helped clear out the road, remove the dead. There were some 12 Croatian soldiers that were murdered, slaughtered. One had to live through all that, gather everything...

And Praljak was involved in this?

Of course. He organized the corpses to be removed, to clear out the road. That was in Dvor upon Una, when he came... The next day, when we started our final breakthrough, Praljak came during early morning hours. Miro Međimorec was with him, as was Marko Bojović. The three of them came there. We organized for the dead to be removed, for the things to be cleared out, to relieve these troupes. So, not a single move from him, nothing in his behavior said that something negative should be done in any way, in any part. He helped with the clearing the road, the organization of getting Croatian forces from Dvor upon Una to Bosanski Novi, during which he was with the troupes, following - and where absolutely nothing happened... Do you understand what I am saying?

His authority was enormous and this man had never... I think that no one will be able to find a single example where he, whether in thought, words or actions, did something, no one could say a single bad word about him. He was always humane... extremely tolerant, all of his actions were decent.

So after these events, after the whole area was recovered, Praljak was there and to tell you the truth... I am not sure how we went our separate ways. I no longer remember all the details.

Of course, a lot of time has passed. I will only ask you about one more event which you might have witnessed. There were some civilians who were found along the way - something had to be done about them, they had to get some kind of protection. Do you remember that? Was Praljak there?

While we were in Dvor upon Una, we found a lot of civilians there. Civilians, people who remained to live there. And Praljak was there too. During all this, he kept emphasizing the segment: "do not let anyone do something stupid". That was always his starting point and he kept men, and gave... Not orders because he was not there on official business, but as a man and a person he would always say: «Don't! You are the Croatian army! Take care of people, help them, do things!»

Little while ago you mentioned that man who was beside himself – I am sure there were more men who were like that. There were a lot of people who were like that, during that state of chaos...

Absolutely, that is correct.

I suppose that, in a situation like that, it is not enough just to say «guys, do not do anything stupid!», but one has to put much more effort into keeping things in order. What was it like? How did Praljak keep things in order?

Praljak went around, Praljak was there. People know who he is. One must know that the most horrible crimes, other than Vukovar, took place in that region. There was a large number of mass graves, everything that was Croatian was burned – and at that moment, controlling the emotions of people who had lost everything was extremely difficult. It is easy for us to talk about all this today, but imagine a man whose wife was killed, whose child was killed, and

everything he owned was burned. He had no life! Such a man is capable of anything. Other things do not concern him at all.

I know. Which is why I ask what does a good commander do in such a moment.

But he, Praljak had the authority. Praljak was the law. Praljak always asked for order and discipline. I remember, he asked the troupes to be neat, to be clean, to look like a real army - not some disheveled gang, but an army. We survived in Sunja only because he imposed these rules. He defined the rules of behavior. I will never forget, he even had some American book on how to build bunkers, how to go on the patrol... None of us had any such training, and he would get this information and then say: "You see, that is how it is done, that is how we are going to do that." He did all that. I never heard any of the men say... The only thing was, unlike many of us, he had a totally different opinion on how things were going to develop. In that sense, he was much better than us: he predicted all the things that happened later on, how things would be, how everything was going to look like, the role of the international community - he correctly predicted everything that would happen and how.

Did we cover everything? Is there anything else that might be important?

I can only say that I feel sorry that these things are happening today and that I am extremely frustrated and sad because of it. I simply cannot believe why all of this is happening - not only to Praljak, but to the country, to me, to all of us. I cannot understand it. As far as he was concerned, I can say that he was a real soldier, in the true sense of the word, he was a fair, brave and honest man.