

PETRIČEVIĆ SLAVKO

Zagreb, January 2006

The interview was recorded, the recording is registered as follows:

petricevics 1 .wav

26.01 MB

The interview was conducted in Sesvete

Our dictaphone is switched on, at the beginning I would like you to introduce yourself. That is, to state your name, last name, date and place of birth, residence, occupation.

My name is Slavko Petričević. I was born on November 17th, 1968 in Uskoplje, Bosnia and Herzegovina. By occupation I am a sports coach. During the war I was a member of a unit that was active at the Operational zone Tomislavgrad.

We are interested in these years of war, we will go back to that period. My first question is about your combat path. Where were you when the war started, what were you doing? In a few sentences, please.

Well, in a few sentences, at the beginning of the war I was in Republik Österreich, in Austria. I returned around the end of 1991 and joined the 4th Split Brigade. The war has spread to territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and my house was there. After Kupres fell I returned to my native area, my family was there and most of my relatives, and there I actively joined the organization of the defense of that region. So, in the beginning of 1992, when organizing the Croatian Defence Council (cro: Hrvatsko vijeće obrane; HVO) was in progress, I was a member of the "Eugen Kvaternik" brigade in Bugojno. Within the brigade, a special assignments unit was formed. That was the formulation we used back then, today it would be called an intervention unit. That unit was the first active unit during the attacks on Bugojno municipality that were coming from Kupres and Donji Vakuf. The unit was dismissed after the defense line was formed. A brigade was formed in Bugojno and I was appointed the commanding officer to one of the two battalions. After that I was...

That was when?

That was June 1992. I spent that entire period in the Bugojno region, mostly

working on fortifying the defense lines toward Kupres, I was simply involved in defending that town and that region. After the fall of Bugojno we entered the region of Rama, Livno, the population there moved to different directions, to help other towns. We tried to organize a part of the broken corps and were doing other things, to return, to help defend Uskoplje, Rama and other marginal areas that were the closest, and that is how we arrived, that is how the majority of the unit arrived to the region of Rama municipality. That was in ninety... three, during July and August, I think. Bugojno fell in July, on July 21st, if I recall well. So, our unit set out to... Tomislavgrad, Livno, Rama, right now I cannot recall the names of all towns, but mainly, after organizing and collecting, we... Our unit was reorganized and then merged with the Second attack battalion (cro: Druga lakojurišna bojna) of the Livno Military police and basically, as a unit we were deployed in the region of Rama, Uskoplje. We spent the entire time there, mostly. Since we owned no houses or anything else and we had time to spare – qoute on qoute – we would spend it here, in Rama. You know: the front line, and after that the spare time which was spent a few kilometers away from the lines, no more than that. In 1993, at the end of 1993, sometimes during December, we were sent to the front line in Uskoplje, in Ždrimci, if I recall well, and we spent a month or two along these lines, I cannot say exactly. We would fill in where there was need for that, perform interventions, and during that time it was only one period of defense, active defense, there were no attack actions as I recall it. Sometimes in February, at the beginning of February of ninety... four? That's it, 1994, it was in July, August of 1993 when we set out, got organized, returned... At the end of 1993 we already started performing actions in these areas, a month, or two months, that was the beginning of February, approximately. Of 1994. And that was about the period during which the event happened I would like to refer to, that is, the event that is the subject of this conversation.

So, this was happening in February of 1994?

February, roughly speaking.

Before that, can we mention the year of 1992 in a few words? What was the situation on the terrain during 1992, in the area you were stationed? How was the army organized, what was the status of mobilization process and positions on the front line, how was the cooperation between Muslims and Croats going? What were the biggest problems during 1992?

1992 was a bit specific year, year of unexplainable events concerning Muslims, I think. The situation was different on a municipality basis, things were different in every region. A bit funny even, I think. There would be a situation, particularly in the area we were stationed in – Uskoplje was among the first towns where conflicts between Muslims and Croats arose, while relations in the neighboring Bugojno municipality were completely normal, even more so, level of cooperation there was very high. Logistical cooperation was also very good, to the point that it was impossible to perceive the possibility of any kind of hostility or incidents or similar. Cooperation was simply good, they had a common enemy, on the Chetnik lines – probably that was partly the reason, everyone was involved into that and... as far as Bugojno was concerned, everything was functioning well, life was normal. Nothing could be noticed, while reports coming from other municipalities in Central Bosnia stated similar things, a spark or a conflict here and there...

Good, but 1992 was in fact the year of common defense, the common enemy, Croatian component was better organized, there were actions on armaments, common military trainings, and so on. Have you also...?

I will tell you of my particular experience – that was absolutely the case and the thing that I regret to this day, and cannot understand... Up until May, June of 1993 things like that were not happening. In Bugojno, as I said at the very beginning, Croats stopped the aggression, formed the line, and only after that the

BiH (cro: Bosna i Hercegovina; Bosnia and Herzegovina) army started organizing. A few months after that Muslims joined, so they were given a certain region toward Donji Vakuf, while HVO was holding the line toward Kupres, and relations were not exactly... Muslims were still thinking – how to give passage to JNA (cro: Jugoslavenska narodna armija; Yugoslav People's Army) tanks toward Kupres, what flowers do they need, and so on. Finally, when I came to attend a meeting – that was after the initial conflicts, when we stopped the enemy and came to attend the meeting in the municipality building... I think that a Muslim was heading the municipality, there was a large picture of Tito on the wall...

In what municipality? Where did you come?

In Bugojno. I think it was the major's office, if I recall well, he was a Muslim – the biggest picture of Tito I have ever seen. I don't know whether it was Mlivo, or Mlačo, or someone else from that set, I don't remember his name anymore. Joža! I asked him what is this one doing on the wall and then I noticed they were looking at me in a funny way. This was a situation where we came there, after suffering losses, having wounded people and everything else – all that happened, not to mention all the other things – and they were still, during that period, they were still taking an oath and still thinking about whether it was this or that – but OK, after a certain amount of time I guess they decided that was it. What were their motifs, their goals – that I don't know, but I am telling you that they were absolutely not... Only later on, when they saw, when the first corpses of their people were delivered, that was when they got serious, they saw that this was not a joke and after that they said that, OK, we were right, and joined the defense. But, all that was working until about May or June and – this I remember exactly, the office of the commander of the battalion I was in charge of was positioned up in the Workers' sports center (cro: Radnički sportski centar) and I was passing by there on one occasion during our routine visits,

because we were holding the lines up there. About five or six hundred meters from the sports center there is a hill with a hospital on it and the Chetnik lines were, let's say, twenty kilometers away – I saw that trenches were dug out. I could not believe my eyes! The trenches, dug out and pointing to our office of the commander.

When did you notice that?

Well, it was May or June of ninety... three.

May or June of 1993?

Yes, roughly. 1993. And then I sent a platoon of older men who were securing the office of the battalion commander and other things, they were locals, so I sent two, three of them to, as we say it, gather pine-cones, to go for a walk up there and they provided me with facts: those were good trenches, as they said it, Bastille-like, bounded and everything else – and the Chetniks lines were twenty or thirty kilometers away.

Were you surprised by these trenches?

Well, to be honest, I was, regardless of everything that was happening in the neighborhood – I was.

Yes, that is the reason I am asking. Trenches like that were discovered near Bugojno a while earlier. You did not know that? It was in January of 1993...

Well, I was surprised. There are not many things that surprise me, but that surprised me. I was surprised because our leadership in Bugojno at that time was very convincing, so very convincing in explaining that there is no chance of a conflict, and simply... And finally, we were soldiers, we had to trust our superior officers and, guided by that fact, I simply thought that something like that cannot happen. I was surprised in that regard, because I trusted my superiors, and they

were claiming that there were no reasons, no chance of a conflict. Now, were Muslims deceiving them, or were they deceiving us, I know nothing of that relations, but someone was certainly being deceived. And then, when I saw those trenches, they did not fit into the story I was told every day.

So, the trenches were there. Who built them?

Those were, you know how it was in the battalion. There were certain areas where they sneaked in, the same as in the majority of cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina where they would sneak in, among Muslim population, among Croatian population, into bases that belonged to different units, and so on. That hill where they were stationed also, their unit was there.

They were stationed? You mean Muslims?

Muslims, yes.

And they were facing...?

They were facing our battalion, at a distance of about 700 or 800 meters along the line. But, they were well camouflaged. At first you couldn't see the real proportions, but as they went up there for a walk, to scan the situation, people who were appointed to do that, they reported that the trenches were really there, fortified, interconnected by highways, as they are called in military slang and everything else. That they also had shelters, that there were connections with shelters and the hospital, and everything...

Considering your military knowledge and experience, and considering the configuration of the terrain – what was the approximate time Muslim spent on digging these trenches? And of course, considering the fact that they were doing it secretly. So, how long did it take, approximately?

To build the positions so well arranged, considering the fact that they were not

built using machinery, they were built silently and more or less during the night – at least in the first stage it certainly took several months...

Approximately several months?

Certainly. At least two or three months were needed to do it in that way, because obviously it was not possible to employ fifty people to work on that, it is well known how it was done. And then, considering a period during which the decision was met, plans were made and the rest... in that case, I don't know, we go back to 1992.

Good, let us not talk about things we are not familiar with. What happened then?

What happened? If you ask me, ridiculous things happened – things that would be funny, if only they were not sad. Normally, I reacted, I sent an oral and written report to the office of the commander, to the brigade, up the hierarchy, as it should be done, and they sent an operative. I asked the man what was going on, what is about to happen, what were his information – and he explained me, as if I were a five-year old child, that they were just fortifying their positions toward the Chetniks. The war against the Chetniks was going on for a year already, Chetnik lines were twenty kilometers away and now all of a sudden they were fortifying their positions here: five, six hundred meters from our unit, with trenches pointing at us. If that were a Muslim giving me such an explanation, that would be logical – but to hear it from an operative who... I was looking at him, wondering whether I was insane, or he – one of us was certainly insane, but then it turned out it was not me. Within two or three months it became clear it was not me, because that was where my conflict started, that is, let us not refer to it as a conflict, it was a disagreement with certain stands, because I knew that from that position they could threaten anyone moving in that area, whenever, by any means, and... I simply did not agree to that, but I

was convinced that this was it by my superiors, local military experts, quote on quote. They should have find a three- or four-year old child, maybe that child would believe their story... and that is how it came to disagreement. I simply could not allow that people who were there every day, who were working in the office of the commander, in security services, logistics, everything... 50 – 60 people were here every day, like on the palm of a hand, and if I was to allow that, I would feel personally responsible: morally, legally, in any way. To have allowed that. But, I will say it, that was the answer from our command and I saw that there is no coherence there, no logic, no common sense. I suggested that we should fortify and take some other actions, and then I was removed from office. Relief and everything else, because I was, by my opinion, presenting a greater risk of provoking conflicts, right?, while at the same time they had trenches dug out above their heads. I don't know, about one month after that I left Bugojno, I took a leave. They told me "go, take a rest, take 10 days off". And when I got back, they told me "you know, we have appointed another commanding officer for the battalion" and everything else. Fine, that was clear to me as I was leaving to take a break and, sadly, it happened just like I predicted. I think it happened in early July already, that means two months after that. They were preparing for a long time to what happened, while our side continued to negotiate for peace. They brought not only one part of Croatian Defense Council, but also a large number of civilians who were in Bugojno, they brought them to where they brought them. I think Bugojno finally fell on the 20th or the 21st of July. I went away and came back, we came back during the period before Bugojno fell, I returned from my leave and tried to help from up there, that is from Uskoplje. We got organized, because at that time one part of people from Bugojno who were outside the town, they could not return from their leaves and other, they could not go further than Pavić polje because the war started, Muslims were attacking and there we got organized with that part of the people, in the school building, we tried to connect on the lower part. Sadly, it was all happening very

fast in Bugojno, Muslims did it in only couple of days – because they were preparing for a long time, unlike our side – they simply trampled the town down in only a few days. Then the removal of population happened, that mass movement across the woods in the upper part. After that, the story happened with our arrival to Livno, Tomislavgrad. There we tried to get organized again. We saw what happened, how it happened. Those willing to get involved again, after all that happened – because, more or less, when something like that happens to them, the majority of people think: there is nothing more for me to defend, and so on. But, they simply considered it was their duty to defend ourselves, regardless of losing control over the town, so we organized one part of the people into a unit and joined, following the reorganization, the Second attack battalion, which I was mentioning earlier. And then we started performing actions on the terrain, we were up there all the time...

Where?

Uskoplje. It was called the Uskoplje-Rama front. We were helping there, filling in, mending the front lines, even though during that period there were no other activities – only defense, defense! So it was during that period. And then, in early 1994, it was February, the following happened. I will try to make a short description, to depict what really happened in a simple way, in a factual and chronological order. These were the unfortunate events that, sadly, happened to us. Basically, it was as follows.

It was sometime during February. After we spent some 20 days on the terrain in Ždrimci, Uskoplje, a substitute unit arrived and we were given two or three days off to take a shower, and so on, since a sizable portion of the soldiers were stationed in Rama with their families and our base was in Gračanica, a village down toward Jablanica, between Rama and Jablanica. We were stationed in the school building, there we functioned as a unit, leaving for actions on the terrain, coming back and everything else. On that day I returned from the terrain, I gave

my soldiers a day off, or two days, to go to their families, to take a shower, change clothes and everything else, because on the terrain there was no electricity, no water, it was winter time, cold and everything else. And so it happened that I took four of the soldiers with my car, left them in the town and went to change my clothes as well. My parents were staying in one of the villages. The plan was, they will do what they need to do and I will pick them up again on my way back and we will return to the base. But, while they were waiting for me to pick them up at the arranged place, guys went for a drink to a cafe. I went in after them, I was not there for five minutes, I did not even have a juice. I mean, I don't know how important it is to mention that, in terms of the conflict, but almost all of them were having a coffee or a juice. We were not, these guys that were with me, one of them was a personal protection teacher, they were sportsmen, and so on. They were not inclined to alcohol, they were not drinking alcohol at all, and I am saying that to emphasize that they were not people prone to incidents. I was there and saw it with my own eyes, otherwise I could not believe how conflicts and problems can arise out of nothing. Namely, there were local turmoil from certain sick people, I cannot refer to them in a different way. Toward one of the soldiers. I saw it, we were standing in the cafe when they asked him "Are you from Uskoplje?" He answered "I am." I considered it a normal conversation, people recognized each other – and all of a sudden, the next thing he said was "bastard from Uskoplje, what are you doing here?" and he punched the man in the head.

You knew them both?

I did not know the other one, our man was...

So, it was someone who's name you don't know...

Someone I don't know by name, yes...

In that cafe?

Yes, in the cafe. I was completely confused, I thought it was a normal conversation, and then I saw them fighting. Now, what needs to be mentioned? It was a period when it was enough to yell and make noise, saying I am from that village, I am this or that, look at him, he is from there, what is he doing here – that was the way you could move the masses. And no one could control that, it was simply like that. The tragedy was that they did not even know each other, there was no alcohol on our side, because they had no time to be drinking, they went to their homes, the same like me, and when I got back they were drinking juice, coffee – even today I simply cannot determine the reason, I cannot perceive what was the reason for that – except, maybe, alcohol or drugs, with that other man. I cannot understand that a conflict can arise out of that. And of course, we had to defend the man and it all turned into a big bar fight, a massive fight that lasted for 5, 6 minutes. It was 4 or 5 of us and they labeled us as foreigners, as men from Uskoplje and everyone on the opposite side... So, there was fight, we managed to get out of the cafe, to get outside. It was like a movie scene. You could see the fight from outside, 30, 40 people involved in a fight.

Was it so many of them? So, the number was...

Yes, when they saw it from the outside, it was a mass fight. Those who were driving by, they would stop their cars and get involved in the fight. So, more or less, the guy from our side who took the worst beating was a man who got wounded in his leg twice, he was 70% invalid, he could not stand on his feet and the rest of us were more or less, we were... It lasted for another 15, 20 minutes, fighting and so on and he could not stand on his feet, so five or six men were beating him. It was a real fight, kicking, there were even those on crutches. If people would passing by in a car, they would stop the car, get out and get involved in the fight... I simply could not believe what was going on. For no reason, out of nothing. It was going on like that for about twenty minutes. As the

situation came down a bit, we managed to get the one who was on the ground into the car and we got out of there. In the meantime, someone already called for our men, the rest of the soldiers who were down at the base in Gračanica, who were not going home to take a shower. Someone called for those left down there. So, we came to our senses a bit, found water, cleaned ourselves and headed for the base, because it was like it was, there was nothing that could be done about it. But, as we were leaving the town, we saw our men coming from down there on a bus.

How far away was the base?

Maybe some ten kilometers.

So when you were leaving the town, they were already on their way...

They were already on their way, probably... because the fight lasted for 20 minutes, half an hour. And then it took us another ten minutes, maybe half an hour to get together, go up there, wash our faces and go on our way. That was about how long it took them down there to go on their way, so I stopped our bus...

What was your group called at that moment? Did you have a name, how were you referring to your group?

The entire unit?

That group, the unit, what was it called?

At that time we called ourselves The Ravens (cro: Garavi).

The Ravens?

Yes. So what happened next? I stopped the bus, because I saw it approaching, I recognized the bus. It was an independent carrier, he was with us the entire time,

he would transport the unit, he was always in the base when we needed him, that was our transportation. So I stopped them, and normally – they were told even more, they were told on the telephone that masses of people are beating up our men and so on – but like I said before, at that time that was a good enough reason to get involved, there was no stopping, especially considering the fact that we were coming from the terrain, you would come... and incidents were started by those who were not active on the terrain, that was where the animosity was coming from. So you would come back from the front line, after fighting to protect them in a freezing weather, for instance, we would spend about 20 days on the front line and I believe that they did not spend 20 days on the terrain combined, during the entire war, but that is how it was. So, it was normal to have animosities. I stopped the bus at the town exit, there were about 30 of our men in the bus, those who stayed on the shift, fully armed, they set out to search for us. Now, there is one thing, you have to be careful about one thing: the fact that I was the commanding officer of that unit made no difference – it was impossible to stop them at that moment. With all the persuasions to "leave it be, it is fine, it's nothing really, he was only slightly injured, they will calm down, everything's fine". It took about half an hour of stirring until I...

With your own men?

With our, with my men, but they were mad. I tried to calm them down and prevent further escalation, because all the weapons were already..., I knew that those up there were drunk, our men were not, they returned from the terrain and so – but believe me, talking about it now, in a normal situation, it is easy to say "you could have done this or that"... I think that holding them up for half an hour was a big thing and it was for a great advantage, because things would get much more tragic otherwise. If only I could do it for a longer time, but I was simply in a position where they... they just went on, screw you, we don't care if you will join us, we are going to get even with them. And then...

Just a moment, you as the commanding officer were not able at that moment to...?

No chance! It was not possible, no one could have done it. Especially when they saw that man all beaten up... even today I shudder speaking of that. And knowing different stories from the war, what would happen if that was done by some people who were going around bars, pretending to be local sheriffs and everything else, with guys who were fighting war on the other side. In that moment, maybe it cannot be even described by words right now, but it was simply... Like I said, at that moment no authority would be able to, to... even if the late Tuđman would rise from his grave and come to them at that moment, he would have no chance... So, no authority would be able at that moment, the rage was too intense and it was... Like I said, even for that half an hour, I was convincing them, I was bickering with my own men, bickering! Regardless of, I believe – I know that it was like that, others can confirm it, I had a lot of influence, my authority over those men was quite good, that military authority, because I was working selflessly, trying to make examples, I would listen to them – but in that situation there was no chance, no means to control the situation. Like I said, I consider it my personal success that I was able to hold them up for half an hour, maybe one hour. To let it happen in that moment, it would result in a massacre. And then, after all that persuasion, they simply left, they did not care whether I want to join them. And now I was in the following situation: they left, and if I don't join them – without burdening myself with "he will not go, he cannot go", this or that – I was thinking that if I join them, I will be able to calm them down or stop them again, or do something else. So I went after them, I joined them, because they were on foot. Along the way, during that half an hour, I was talking to them, saying that it was not a big deal, that we will find them later, we can deal with that later, things like that. But, as if one bad thing was not enough – an accident happened... Today I would be happy if we managed to find the man who initiated the whole thing and beat him up, I don't

care about the others that got involved. But, what happened? Did they get the information that we were coming? They started organizing in and around that cafe and they started moving in our direction – so in the middle of the town we were in the position where both us and them were moving. They were walking down the streets, I could hear them, I heard everything, like "there goes Uskoplje" and so on, they were provoking, walking the streets drunk, shooting in the air. And when the contact was established, shooting occurred, that's clear. Now, there is one thing... I mean, it is hard for me to talk about that because of victims, since I know that the guys who were... there were victims, I don't know, 5, 6 wounded, two killed and everything else. They also had casualties, but I look at all of them them as people from our side, I don't make differences, I cannot. Though I think and am 90% certain that they themselves killed one of them, because if we are talking about a conflict, it is fair to say that it was them and us. I guess that guy had a friend on our side and he was about to tell us what was going to happen, so I think they did it to him... but one cannot be certain with all that shooting. It is impossible to explain things, there were 30 armed men on both sides, it was a street fight, a battle, they were shooting...

For how long was that going on?

I don't know, 20 minutes maybe, half an hour. They took captive of one of our men and we went to take him back. Mainly, it was an ugly thing, it is hard to talk about that because of the victims, today I consider it my only flaw from the war – regardless of the fact that in that moment no one would be able to prevent it. It simply happened and, not wishing to talk about myself in a commendable way – but I think that, had I not been concentrated and able to calm things down a little, the consequences would be of a much wider extent, they would be huge, huge, I don't even wish to think about what would have happened if we would come into that cafe with some 50 armed people there...

How did this conflict end?

It ended like.. you know how it ended? After, sadly, people got killed, some were laying down, some wounded, severely even – those who were making the most noise while walking down the street, they left, they ran away and took shelter. The shooting stopped and people were withdrawing spontaneously. So, that was one of the more difficult stories in my entire life. As I said, I don't like to remember that – but, I am still maintaining that there was no solution to that. Things could have been only worse... What happened? They retreated back to the bus. As we came down there, we were informed by telephone that some people got killed and wounded. And the next thing that happened... It just happened and we could not get out, there were threats coming from the brigade that they will attack us.

What brigade?

The local one, from Rama. With tanks, this and that, and so on,

That was during the day?

That evening, that evening... But what was the problem?, there was no way out for us: Muslim were down there, we were here, we had no other choice than to engage in a battle, and that's it. It must be said that I was having several conversations, I phoned – I don't know, some commanding officer and had a several conversations with him, I tried to calm things down somehow, and when I realized that it could happen – they asked us to attend a meeting. You see, I knew where I would be attending the meeting. I was aware of the circumstances. Sadly, they had several such episodes. And when I say "they" – I mean, I don't want to, I wouldn't want to say negative things about any region, about Rama... There are a lot of decent people up there, people who fought, people who gave their best to keep things going. So when I say "they" I mean those who were parading around the town, acting as if they were some sort of local gangsters, or

what ever we'll call them – they were the initiators of certain conflicts, and in the end, they got into conflict with every single unit that came from outside. Learning from experiences others had before us, of people being beaten, their jeeps set on fire, commanding officers beaten up, from those who considered themselves to be local sheriffs – I was aware of where I was going to, into what I am getting involved and... simply, no normal person goes willingly into such situation, into such surrounding. But, telephone lines were active, we had several members from Rama, so this was not a case of a conflict between people from different regions, except for those morons who provoked everything, they were separating people by regions. I said before that many of our families were accommodated in Rama. And from that aspect, like I said, there are many people up there who helped us, decent people, there is no point in saying it all over again or praising someone, but that is how it was. Except for those morons, who gave their best to make everything... One of our men, he was from Rama and his friend informed him that – you see how many hotheads were there and how difficult it was to control that! Their command was unable to control it, because they also had normal people there who were looking at things like soldiers. The commanding officer on their side called me on the telephone, saying that he cannot restrain them, that they want to set out...

Who was the commanding officer?

Franjić. "I cannot calm them down!" I understood that it was a confusing situation, they wanted to set out. So I told him on the telephone: "What can be done about that, if that is the situation, if you cannot restrain them, if they want to go, what else can I do but to defend myself?" I cannot escape from where I am, it is how it is. What, what can I do about that? So, after that I... He was talking about a meeting we should organize, he wanted me to come up there. He offered to send the military police, security and everything else. I told him, there is no use in holding meetings after everything that happened, I regret what

happened and the way it happened, but this is simply no time to organize meetings. And then he was on his feet, ready to leave, saying he cannot control things. I believe he could not control them because I experienced the same thing a few hours earlier, if I had not seen that I would have thought that he... But I believed he was not able to control them, I know how it was for him. At that time, it was a specific period where you had no control. But then, that certain group of idiots – I cannot refer to them differently – they managed once more to pull out something which made me react again, knowing that my life is very much at stake, much more than it is today in Iraq. They gathered some of our families, they knew where they were living, they gathered women and children and threatened to use them as a living shield... So you see, another thing, that situation... When the man told me that, I called him back, saying "send those two from the police" and I went up there for a meeting. There was no other way, children were in danger, God forbid a child gets hurt... I knew that 300 of them were up there, armed, drunk, high on drugs – but, like I said, there was no other alternative. Those idiots, that group of idiots who provoked the situation was the indicator of how hot-headed they were. If they could come up with something like that, it was clear that they were close to insanity. And now to have somebody's child get hurt – I mean, that would mean something I could not even imagine. So, OK, I asked my men who will join me and one of the soldiers joined me up there. As we were approaching, they already set up 5 road stations. To be honest, I put on a bullet-proof vest, took my gun – I had no choice, I was aware where I was going to. As we arrived there, we managed somehow to get through to the command, and around the command there were, by my judgement, around one hundred people, heavily armed, ready to set out. But nothing, we went up to join the meeting.

The meeting was attended by, I cannot recall his name, I think it was, I know it was Skender, he was the commanding officer at the time. Šiljeg was there, but was Praljak also there? There were several other local officers, Franjo was there,

then there was... I cannot recall at the moment whether people from SIS (cro: Sigurnosna informativna služba; Security Information Service) were attending the meeting, those who were giving statements, and so...

And Praljak? Was he there or not?

I think, on that first meeting... I cannot recall.

So, you don't know?

I don't remember exactly. But I know that he was there the day after... And that night...No, I cannot say exactly, I don't think he was there, but I am certain he was there the next day, I will tell you about that later, I know all the details about how it was. There were various situations that are not really relevant right now, like dropping in during that meeting, an attempt to eliminate me, and so on.

During the meeting, in front of the commanding officer?

Yes, in front of officers, and so on, but OK...

How was that stopped?

Well, this is how that particular attempt was stoppet. I was sitting down, it was 7, 8, 10 of us. I was sitting there, when a man rushed in carrying a gun. The bodyguard from the Skender's security service was an acquaintance of mine from before, a friend, we knew each other – so a man rushed in, I guess he was a relative of one of those men who got killed or wounded, he simply rushed in during the meeting, his gun reloaded, he was looking at me, and at that moment, the bodyguard grabbed him by the arm, when the bullet was already in the barrel. So, it would only took one more instant. Now, what was I in that moment...

Just a second! So in that moment, none of these seven, eight, ten people, commanding officers in the room had no authority to command...?

No, no way! Well...

No rank, no authority, no papers?

Well no! I am telling you...

So the only prevailing thing at that moment was the fact that one man was faster than the other and grabbed his arm...

It was only that, only that, and around us – around us there were hundreds of armed, drunk, drugged, frustrated people, and all the rest. Now, you can imagine how it was to report on the case in such a situation. Thank God I was concentrated enough, he grabbed the man, he calmed down and sat down to talk. After that, during the conversation, he threw a glass at me, then I grabbed an ashtray, jumped toward him and I said to him – I don't care if there are hundreds of your men around me, but you will not slap me, I don't care if I die, but that... all that was not important, but maybe it should be said that the situation then was such that there was no order, no one had any influence, no chance, no one could control that. They could not prevent people from rushing in during the meeting or something, not to mention other things. And look, that is what was happening there, the entire evening was spent on giving reports, I know that helicopters were flying, that the police was coming. Maybe, I don't know, maybe Praljak arrived by helicopter. I cannot recall that detail right now, but I know for certain that he was there the next day. Mainly, that meeting lasted for 2 hours maybe, I reported everything that happened, all the facts and the truth, I had no reason to conceal anything. Unfortunately, things happened, and now it is how it is. After two or three hours the meeting was over, but we remained, myself and the soldier that was accompanying me, because the condition was – you see, the mob was in command, what the commanding officer said had no effect. The

mob gathered and was in command – it was like in a film, funny, I don't want you to get it in a wrong way, it was like when they wanted to crucify Jesus – that was the demand the mob made, they wanted to crucify me, down by the crossing. Not to kill me, but to crucify me. That was their demand. And I am not joking. That is how it was.

That was their demand?

It was their demand to crucify me, and then they would scatter. In every other case they would come in, kill people, and so on... So, let me tell you one thing, it was simply impossible, absurd to speak of any kind of order. Even more, there were a lot of military police there.

Military police existed?

Military police existed, but there was nothing they could do. They could not, look: 2, 3 guys from the military police were standing at the door, surrounded by 100, 200 people with machine guns, literally! Not only guns, they had machine guns. Such was the condition there. It was actually funny, I still remember that. That was a prefabricated object, made of Styrofoam-type material, so a bullet could penetrate from one end to the other... And they even aimed tanks at it, at the object the two of us were in. We were some kind of hostages... So what happened? It was a difficult situation and yet one could laugh, the other guy told me: should we lay down here? Why lay down? Laying down or not, it is the same, the object is what it is. So, then there was another situation. I cannot recall the exact terms, but in the meantime I had to make more statements, they were coming in, I know there was some criticism from the commanding officers, they probably did not know the whole truth at the beginning, it went like: what have you done, you will all go to prison and answer for what you've done, and so on. I mean, to me it was a normal reaction, I knew exactly what happened, it could not be mended, and finally, I was prepared to face anyone, including the court. I

knew I did everything I could and I think that if anyone had a positive role in all that, I believe it was me, otherwise consequences would have been much worse, and that is something I am proud of. The death toll would certainly be much higher if I had not done that and, like I said, I regret that I was not able to do more, but at that time no one was able to do more. Do you know what was the way of handling things then? Local units had their commanding officers who were not paying much attention to others, they did not listen very carefully to what others were saying, they would say, let that colonel or general say that to someone else, but they respected those people who were going with them, like warriors – that was their reach, that meant something to them. The local commander, the officer commanding the unit, he was relevant to them. I mean, to tell you the truth, during that period, regardless of the fact that those were organized units, but those units were more or less independent, they were acting on their own initiative. Let me share with you my opinion and the experience that proved... I think that it was the HVO (cro: Hrvatsko vijeće obrane; Croatian Defense Council) who performed the first coordinated action, the action to regain control over Kupres. Regaining control over Kupres in October of 1994, that's when it happened... And it was us, I think, I know, that was the first time I saw certain military models, from the heavy artillery, ordnance, anti-armor weapons on relevant positions, units on their positions, orderly logistics – that was the first time during the war that I saw an organized front line and everything else.

Let us go back to that evening, that night. What happened next?

Next, we stayed there. We stayed there, the siege continued throughout the evening, we were waiting for them to enter the door and kill us. I must return to one detail here, when the turmoil happened again, I jumped on my feet, a military policeman was at the door, I took his gun away from him and reloaded it, I said "this is the way we will talk from now on" and I kept the gun. Because I

came to a place where I was surrounded by hundreds of armed, drunk men, I came into an abyss, I did not carry a small weapon because I was prepared to talk – and during that period I almost got killed, and after that I was physically attacked. I did the only thing I could do: I saw my way by grabbing a gun away from a police officer and after that I continued talking with the gun, I never let it out of my hands, no one could take it away from me because we expected to get attacked by 100, 200 people who were gathering around, come in occasionally – we could hear them singing, howling, drinking alcohol and doing other things. They were saying "Let us go!, Let us go!, Let us go! – and I say thank God they did not, that did not succeed because I had a gun, a hand grenade, the other guy also managed to get a gun, and everything else. Consequently, that would have been... During that period, like I said, I cannot put anything to my credit here, saying that I was helping in any way – here I can commend... the next day, I remember that exactly, I will never forget that – General Praljak saved my life.

Just a second, how did Praljak appear there?

He came there the next day. I think he arrived during the night..

Meaning, what? You were still in that...

We were in the operative room, at the end of the building. We were a kind of hostages..

The night passed by...

The night passed by in an anxious and confusing atmosphere, we didn't know whether they will come in or not... As the morning came, there were already some conversations, they sent a delegation to check whether we went out.

The mob was still there?

The mob was still there. I was even thinking of jumping through the window

and leaving, but the window was at 4, 5 meters from the ground and previous October I got wounded in my leg and was still not completely healed, so I knew that there was no chance to jump with that leg... so that solution fell off and we were waiting...

What were you actually waiting for?

Well, we were waiting, allegedly, we were waiting... I cannot say, I know that commanding officers of the units played a role of calming things down, but the savage mob and their demand to crucify me down at the crossing... I was waiting for situation to resolve in a normal fashion, because if I was prepared to enter a situation like that, then there is no need to say that I was also prepared to get involved in exposing the entire process in court of law, by all means, meaning: I was completely prepared and I expected that to happen. Even though it was absurd to speak about judiciary system at that time, I don't know how it was functioning, but I do know that certain investigative judges came to us, that it was put into process, we were giving statements...

So, during the night and in the morning – I would like to know where and in what way Praljak appeared in this whole story?

Well, where did he appear, he appeared...

The microphone is here...

He appeared... Like I said, I cannot recall if he arrived during the night, did he arrive by helicopter or in some other way – mainly, I know that he was there in the morning.

Fine, and what did he then...?

This is what happened... There was still that demand, even though they did calm down a little, commanding officers were trying to intervene, Skender, Praljak.

Praljak was the one who knew certain officers up there in person, so he influenced them, tried to ask – but like I said, there was no chance. He could have – I mean, you can tell it to the commanding officer, but who can control 200, 300 drunk, drugged people? I repeat, I was unable to control a much smaller group and those were the people I was with on the front line every day – and I was still not able. I understand that they were not able and, like I said, I could not see anyone, no one had the authority to calm things down and everything else. During the next day, people who were working in SIS, from the battle area, I don't know which one, one of them came, then the next one, and we gave our statements. We were giving statements, they were writing them down...

You were giving statements while still surrounded...

Still surrounded, the mob still would not disperse, it was still the same. Only now they issued an ultimatum: if by 12 o'clock I am not handed over to them, they will come up – they will come up and kill me and the other one... I saw them, I could hear them, I could feel it, there was a commotion, they already passed by the police, I recall this exactly, I even know who he was, I saw his face and everything else. And then what happened? That was, that was something where Praljak and Skender, I think Šiljeg too, or was he not? Praljak and Skender for certain... Praljak was the target and he was very close to losing his life, he was this close... In a way I, that is one of the reasons, you simply must feel gratitude toward a man and then he, to make a long story short, he saved my life – he got himself exposed – I don't know, I wonder if I would have done the same for me. Surrounded by that unrestrained mob, they – that was the most intense moment, that is, that was the moment when I was certain that it is over, that nothing else can be done. After 12 o'clock, which was the time-limit of their ultimatum, or else they will come up and deal with me. So you see, what was I left to do? The only thing I could do, two of us had guns and a hand grenade, and the only thing I could do was... that hallway was about 30 meters in

length, we lay down behind a desk and reloaded our guns...

So the mob was on its way?

On their way! They got through, I could hear them climbing the stairs and...

They got through downstairs, through the military police?

Yes, the police...

And they started climbing the stairs toward you?

They were on their way... So then I...

You were in the hallway?

We were, on the end of the hallway was an operative room... Myself and one of mine...

Just the two of you?

Yes, and now, we had guns, we had a hand grenade, I saw them coming. While they were breaking through downstairs, we laid down, unloaded our guns, placed the hand grenade by our side. I told him: let them come, do not shoot right away, you know... And then, there was a moment, as they were passing through the hallway, let's say, they passed one third of the hallway...

You could see them?

We saw them, it was a mob, a man with a machine-gun was taking the lead. Did he saw us? We were laying down, hoping that it won't be necessary, and in that moment – like I said, it was a fraction of a second, they jumped in, they were in the office, that is, that was a hallway with offices on one side, and at about the middle of the hallway I saw Praljak coming out and stand in front of them. He was begging them: "Stop, he is here, we can solve this...", he was begging them.

But it was impossible, there was nothing he could do, he was just standing there. I cannot say that they could not have removed him physically – of course they could have, it was a mob, during his monologue the one with the machine-gun fired a blast over his head... It was this close over his head! But, he was standing there, he did not retreat, not even for one millimeter. Did Skender join him? Skender was there, but was Šiljeg also there? And they were begging them, simply diluting the situation... don't do this or that, go back downstairs... It lasted maybe ten, fifteen minutes, maybe 20 minutes, they called for local officers, one of the local officers arrived and he promised to check whether we are still there – they were pretending that they wanted to check whether we are still there – and so, by the effort of these local officers, they called for someone else, this and that, somehow they managed to stop them from advancing and then they – I don't even know how – but they simply retreated.

Were you able to hear what Praljak was saying from your position?

I did, I did hear him – but I am not sure whether I heard everything, it was very noisy, very intense, and everything...

I know you were in a special state of mind, there was a mob...

Look, I remember, what do I remember? I cannot repeat his every word, but I do remember the context and some things he said... He was mostly asking them to stop, to go back, saying that we were still there, but there are institutions to deal with that, that a process will be organized, that an investigative team will be called for, that we will end up in prison, go to court, and so on. That was the approximate context, to...

Was Praljak giving orders then?

Giving orders?

Yes. Was he issuing orders?

It was impossible to give orders, impossible! What do you mean, giving orders? Look, there is one thing...

Formally, considering his rank, he should have been able to...

That was not... Look: how could he, regardless of his rank, when a man he was talking to fired a burst over his head?! When you have a drunk, frustrated man in front of you, and you... risking your head and everything... he's firing over your head, and what, you want to play a commanding officer? Giving orders to the man? No chance of that, absolutely no chance. Regardless of the fact that I respect Praljak, but in that moment, in such a situation, there was no chance, no chance for anybody to... Like I said, local officers were coming, I mentioned a little while ago that local officers had certain influence, I know that from my own experience and everything – but at that moment it was impossible, simply impossible, their minds were set, because these were not sane people, you know... Giving orders? I mean, giving orders to whom? Because, to make that clear, this was not even an organized unit. So, to whom could he give an order? These people gathered, we know that everyone was carrying a weapon at that time, those were civilians in uniforms, that is the term I consider the most appropriate, and that was...

Civilians in uniforms?

Yes, that is maybe the most exact term in the entire story, so there was no... But, that was, they managed to convince them in some way, but they were not giving orders! What orders? I mean, when you are giving an order, you say it – do this or that, you don't spend half an hour bickering with someone who is shooting over your head!

Was that situation really dangerous for Praljak, was his life in danger?

Not only that his life was in danger... One thing: if somebody is firing a rifle couple of centimeters over someone else's head, and they are under influence of alcohol or drugs – who can vouch that the barrel will not slip down for a millimeter, that...

What did Praljak do after the man fired a burst?

Well, nothing, he was still, he was still... That surprised me a little, I consider Praljak to be a strong person, complete, I simply don't know how he felt, but he did not show any kind of agitation. Nothing, he remained cool, peaceful: don't do that, we will solve it, stop, and so on. Now you have a funny situation: a general begging ordinary people – but that was the only way, there was no giving orders, no hierarchy, and finally, that was not even an organized unit. You know, it was a bit funny situation, preceded by all those events, so in a way you can understand how they imagined what they did in their heads, that it was a right thing to do, the only relevant thing... In that moment they assumed the role of a prosecutor, a judge, of God – nothing else mattered to them.

So, we have a mob that is approaching, you were already on the ground, ready to defend yourself by means you disposed of, Praljak came out, joined by others – and how was the mob stopped? What stopped them?

OK, now I will tell one thing to you... I really don't know what stopped them, because dealing with such a mob... he got out first, he was the one over who's head a rifle was fired. It is not easy to handle the truth, not easy to make predictions, but were he not present, there would be another 10, 15 dead. Us included, of course...

You think that Praljak, that because Praljak was there...

Absolutely.

...that it was avoided...

I don't think, I know! There is nothing to think about that! Because, firstly, I too was on the other side, there is nothing for me to think about. If 20 people are coming your way, carrying a machine-gun – what is there to think about? I mean, such was the time, people did not think straight. Here, now that I am speaking about it, I feel like... that was something out of the ordinary, but it was like that and... what is going on in your mind in such a moment, look: you know that you are about to be killed, so what can you do? You can pretend to be St. Peter, a saint, or – if you are going to hurt me, I'm going to hurt you back – that is something that guides you. That is what guides you through such a moment. Now, it was happening in a hallway, a mob of 20, 30 people was approaching, our guns were loaded, there were hand grenades and everything else – it was clear to me that this was the end, that there was no way out for us. It is not important who they were, what were their names, which side they were on – like I said, it is not right that the entire time we are speaking of opposite sides, because to me we were all on the same side – we are talking of 10 victims, tens of victims that absolutely, I can put it in one sentence – Praljak was there and he prevented another massacre from happening.

For how long that mob remained in the hallway, and for how long was Praljak standing in front of them?

It all lasted some, maybe half an hour...

It lasted for that long?

Well it lasted for a long time, 20 minutes, half an hour – there was begging, persuading and everything else, I don't know how to call it. He was begging them to resolve the situation in a different way, in a peaceful way. A state of siege lasted for a day or two days after that, we were still up there.

Just a moment, you remained in that building the entire time?

We were still in the building. We were seemingly protected by the military police that was, like everything else, simply not functional. What could they have done against an unrestrained mob?

Praljak was also there the entire time?

He was there the entire time, he was there, and I say...

Were there any more attempts to break through to you?

Not like that, but there were controls, inspections, I know that they were checking on us during the night to see whether we are not pulled out or transferred by helicopter – like, they were the ones making conditions and everything else. I know that Praljak was calming things down... On one occasion he told me that he was going to try to calm things even further, that we are going to go to prison, that the judiciary system will take over, that we will go on trial: investigation and everything else, and that did happen. Finally, after a day or two, we were transferred to the local prison, the two of us... and then, maybe on the third day since everything started, you could feel that tensions were falling. It happened during morning hours, when there was not so many of them: the cars came, we got into cars and were taken to prison, where in some way we still were – if nothing, that building was more solid. During that period they continued to insist, to demand things, and Praljak was intervening, he was trying, persuading, talking them off and everything else, he was buying time. Some of them got sober and started wondering what were they doing there, decided that it is better to leave and so... And then someone else gets drunk. Mainly, we were in prison a certain amount of time, some 10, 15 days. Within that 10 days I know that investigative judges arrived from Livno, we gave our statements, I still remember these statements, how it was, what it was, we were telling all that. Where they were from, in the meantime, while we were there –

that I forgot! The rest of them, they demanded that our men should be handed over to the police. General demanded the military police to go there, arrest them all and take them to prison...

Who?

Our men, the rest of the soldiers stationed down in Gračanica. Look, we were not trying to escape from what happened, but transferring the soldiers through that territory... I was afraid that another unrestrained mob might attack the bus. I did not agree with transferring them through Rama, so they were transferred by helicopters. I called them and asked them to come, come and talk – I did not even tell them, I could not tell them that they will be transferred to prison and everything else, I told them that the military police will go down there to take statements and that helicopters will come to transfer us to another area. I did not, if I would say the word "prison", they would probably be reluctant: why prison?, you know how it is. And that is how the rest of our soldiers were transferred by helicopters to prison, I think to Ljubuški. The two of us stayed there for, I don't know, 10 days, giving statements, and after 10, 15 days at the most we were also transferred to Ljubuški, to prison. There, a procedure was started in more normal conditions, the process started. I know that our detention was prolonged, then the trial, statements, the question whether I was aware that I was being held responsible, as the commanding officer, of organizing the whole thing – but, I mean, it was senseless to claim that I organized something, that I was involved in all that. When that fight happened up there, I already met them at the town entrance, so it was physically impossible, it was just impossible. So, it was proved that I was not organizing anything, on the contrary, according to all evidence I was persuading people, calming them down and having a positive role in a way – and then they realized that there is no point in mentioning the command responsibility, because I was trying to do the opposite. Now, I don't know much of the judiciary system, but

we remained in prison for a few months. Whether there was a collective responsibility, everyone was shooting and...

Fine, mainly, a legal process on that was organized afterwards...

Yes, yes...

This is what we will do, this is a continuation of the recording and I have to ask you to introduce yourself once more. Please, simply introduce yourself again, since we had an interruption in recording.

Slavko Petričević. Born on November 17th, 1968. Krasnica, Uskoplje, BiH.

This is the continuation of the recording, the question is about your encounters with General Praljak before that event, that is, when did they happen and what were they like?

Well, it was on several occasions, I remember one that was a bit more impressive and that remained in my memory, it happened on the day of an unorganized retreat from Uskoplje, or I don't know what else to call it. An exodus or something. I know that Pidriš up there was the first location where the crowd stopped, civilians, some army members, all thrown into panic. The region of Uskoplje was left completely empty, abandoned and everything else. And I remember seeing Praljak on that occasion, he climbed on a tank, there were only a few soldiers, the crowd could not be controlled. They were retreating, pulling out. And so he suddenly climbed on a tank and said, those willing to go with me, join me, we are going back and those guys that were on the tank, they simply started the tank and began moving toward Uskoplje, and...

Praljak was on a tank?

Praljak was on a tank, I recall that well.

And how did people react?

Well, they reacted, everyone reacted in their own way. You see. The General is going. I don't know what were the reactions. Some were mad, some were not reacting at all. You know, it was a state of confusion. Let them go, if they are that mad, people were making comments. Some were forced to go. Let us go if he is going, in that sense.

So, some people did join him?

Well, certain people joined him. They slowly returned down there. And when the others saw them, several more joined. I cannot say precisely, because I was also joining, so I don't know (*sigh*), I could not say exactly. Anyhow, I know that he went down there and that is how that part, that part of the territory was returned. And they remained on that territory until the war ended.

We have come to the end of our conversation. Tell me, is there anything I forgot to ask you, or something you think should be said?

Well, I think we mentioned all the most important things relating to that period, except maybe a few details. I think we mentioned what was the most important.

Thank you very much.

Zagreb, January 2006