

PREŽEC ŽELJKO

Zagreb March 2006.

The interview was recorded; the tape is marked as code

prezec.wav

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Duration: 27:02

Intview was taken in Zagreb, in hotel „Westin“

Here, our Dictaphone is turned on, could you please introduce yourself, therefore, your name and surname, date and place of birth, residence and occupation.

I'm Željko Prežec, at the moment I'm working as head of the reception in the hotel Westin Zagreb. I was born 14.8.1959 in Zagreb.

Mister Prežec, the reason why we are doing this interview is that a indictment has been set against general Praljak, that is, the part of the indictment where there are talking about criminal alliance, criminal attempt. I'm interested in, comparing to your experience, compared to what you know and you were a witness, how did this function... In the nineties this was hotel "Intercontinental", is that so? What job were you doing then?

In the hotel Intercontinental I was working as deputy director for the reception that is towards the end of the 80's as head of the telephone central. I became a deputy director for the reception, for a short period I was also working as a night director in the hotel, but then I moved again to the day shift as deputy director. Reception.

What you are telling me now, what period is it related to, what year was it?

I'm talking about the period from 1989 to 1994, 1995.

You worked in Intercontinental; it was a well known hotel, which had a name for itself. A lot of interesting people came to your hotel?

Hotel Intercontinental Zagreb was till 1996, when hotel Sheraton Zagreb was built, so till then hotel Intercontinental Zagreb was a special hotel, actually in the whole of former Yugoslavia, especially in the Republic of Croatia, because during that time it was the only hotel at that level and rank, hence a hotel with 5 stars, and was used by various foreign firms, government offices, various organizations as a place where special people were going to be accommodated, actually people that were used to high standard accommodation.

Good. I'm interested in 1992, 1993, 1994. Do you remember which important guests arrived during that time from Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Well practically, on a few occasions known officials from the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they were accommodated for here – they came rarely as some kind of joint delegations or individually such as Mister Šećirbegović, that is Šaćirbej during that time would come with another two or three officials for various talks or meetings here in Zagreb. Mister Alija Izetbegović also stayed in this hotel. Accomodated at our...

Do often was Mister Alija Izetbegović here, do you remember?

I actually remember one of his visits, but I think it was more than once, particularly we had during that time, sometimes and during our days that we were free, we knew when something was going on, however I do know he was here at least once during that period.

You mentioned Mister Izetbegović, Mister Šaćirbegović that is Šaćirebj...

That is true.

Do you remember, when we are already talking about names, was there anybody else?

I don't know, Mister Salimpašić or Salipašić, he was called something like this, lets say, mainly people, who were at that time some kind of officials or around those officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina, didn't matter whether they were coming for official or non-official visits.

It means, they come in one or the other variation?

I must say we didn't always know the reason for their visit, we always had some kind of reservation for them; sometimes they didn't come the exact day they said they would come. Sometimes we were notified in a very short period, but it never happened that they should just happen to role up, there was none of that.

We are referring to the war time, in which way did you accept those high guests, that is in what way were you pleasing their requests, kind of service. How did it look?

In every case, it didn't matter whether it was the war period, if we take away some of those things which are typical for that period, I don't know, a special isolation of the hotel from the outside, in the sense of laying of the wooden boards, bags of sand, during that time when we expected some air attacks or similar things. We had, of course, and special measures for inside the hotel in the sense that we had to have all the rooms darkened, or have the lights turned off. We also had practically and the whole world referring to journalists who stayed here. Very well known journalists who were reporting, people who sometimes, lets say, who behaved freely so they could try and get to some information so they would sometimes take photos from the top floors, even when it was considered to be most dangerous – and during that time that is when they went to the very top, they asked to go onto the roof and similar. Of course, there were certain measures for security which ensure their safety to some degree the people and the hotel and their guests and such situations, so there were even here in this hotel certain teams of people on duty whose job was to control from the outside of the hotel, to see whether everything is the way it should be because of its height it was somehow orientated to that direction, and was dangerous in case there was an attack. Next to that, regarding the measures of accepting, the actual standard of placing the guests – we are talking about a hotel which had in 1996 announced as the Intercontinental hotel in Europe and we always had a high level of quality, and even during the war time – there were certain standards which was maybe a bit more difficult for the people to keep to and work by them, however, everything was done in the human power so that they would be reserved, even in those conditions. So the guests were further of special importance, received particular benefits in relation to, conditionally said, common guests. Meaning that high level people had high level accommodation, special treatment, in some way privileged treatment,

such as in service, and also in safety sense.

Tell me, when these high guests arrived – I'm talking about the people we mentioned a moment ago, from Bosnia and Herzegovina, there were most likely security measures enforced. In what way was it enforced?

In every case, whenever foreign guests were arriving, let it be diplomats, ministers, be it deputies to the presidents or presidents of various countries, there were and still is a certain government service who take care of outside security and they install certain security conditions, and in certain cases they are in contact with us, hotel employees, on various levels and various scales of communication. So if we are already talking about these people, they had the exact same treatment, even during the time there was tension in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through my knowledge and what I was able to see, however, limited contact, but you could figure it out, in the situations when those people were arriving; they had an even better security situation installed. Hence, there were higher measures, more concern over not allowing anything bad to happen and I believe because of that nothing ever happened. Even during the situation in Zagreb when there was animosity because of the general events, it was hard to get to all the information, certain things you were able to find out from people who let's say, were coming here and then relayed the information, be it from their form of channels or simply through television, may it be international or domestic, you see. Even in those situations, those security measures were at the least on the same level, even better when these people were in concern. However, where the actual accommodation is concerned, the actual welcoming: the director of the hotel was mainly awaiting the high foreign delegates, greeted them at the entrance, followed to their room, when ambassadors were concerned they were followed to their apartments. Concretely, Mister Šećirbegović was mainly in the small apartment, they received the usual fruit and similar, as much as we could.

Were there any special requests? Do you remember something being special, or was somebody especially complicated?

I must admit, I don't remember any special situation, maybe concerning ordering in the rooms seeing that they also, when they were arriving, had a few people in their escort, their personal security, meaning...

Did you cooperate with the people in their security?

We were cooperating in the sense that whenever they needed something we tried to help out as much as possible, to give them accommodation, meaning that the rooms next to theirs was always for their closest security people. People who were also in the delegation, who were first or the, closest by place, they were also in the same part of the hotel, which was, of course, was for their interest, but the hotel was, in the end, functioned more easily.

Good, that was during the period of 1991 till 1995, inside that period there was also the conflict in Bosnia between Croats and Muslims. I'm interested in knowing whether anything changed during that period, was there any change in the protocol, regarding security measures?

Well during that period when the conflict escalated, at least judging by the information we were receiving, I have to admit that we changed the concern in these security services that were arriving to secure the accommodation of these guests, let's say...

Could you clarify it for me bit, your talking about national security services that is security services...?

Republic of Croatia, that's it, the Republic of Croatia. In the case when their delegates were visiting, they further had their people who would come with them; however, as I said, and our services were also ensuring the outer security, meaning the route they were taking, and the actual accommodation in the hotel. They weren't with them on the same level, but they were controlling everything, they were questioning the staff whether we noticed anything besides their services, any unusual people in the hotel who weren't actual guests at the hotel, some people that were coming from the side or some people that were guests of the hotel but somehow seemed strange, may it be for this hotel, or we considered that they could be in anyway, dangerous for

anybody and as such for the delegation from BiH. In every case, we cooperated, at the time we had a security service in the hotel, we cooperated in a way that we were of use to them in case when they had to get to somebody... I must admit there wasn't any special situation, most likely thanking the previous work of all these services of the Republic of Croatia. We never had any escalations that I could remember, in the sense that someone attacked somebody, that someone had offended anybody or anything similar.

Good, was it for these guests, during this period of conflict, was it difficult for them in anyway being here?

Where the hotel is concerned, then...

It seems actually that all those measures which you mentioned now went to the interest of the security of these guests?

I worked in this hotel for over 20 years and I must say that in general in this industry, for upholding and improving the work the most important is the security for the guests. We are professionals here and where my experience is concerned, I must say that not at one moment did I notice that the employees or even some outer services complicated the stay for anybody, and even for those people.

Of course you professionally do your job, very professional and that is clear for me. However, I'm interested in the next thing: did you ever from the outside of the hotel suggested that your guests were unwanted, or maybe they were?

No, not for a moment.

Our security services knew....

That's it.

And during the period of the conflict which was going on then, you, had never noticed any suggestions, no instructions, let's call it like that, formal or informal, official or half official, that the people were less important, less welcome?

No, not for a moment. Even, I believe it's understandably, in the end, if you

receive somebody, if you accommodate them somewhere, it means that at a certain moment you have the need to communicate with them then I believe it was in no ones interest to in any way degrade them or, I don't know, to show them in any way that they are not welcome. That is what I was able to notice. I can't talk about, of course, nor about meetings that were held in city, or anywhere, I say, I'm talking about situations that were happening here, inside the hotel.

Tell me, your guests were happy?

As far as I know they were. Practically everybody, all our guests would usually express themselves very positively about this hotel, about the service they received here, I never noticed that anyone felt insecure being here. Of course there is a possibility that someone felt some kind of misgiving, what will happen, how will it be, however I believe that very quickly with us, after they have seen how they were greeted, how we are treating them during their stay, they realized there was no danger. I say once again, regardless of that most likely in some circles that were around those people, people were working, and their, and ours, their jobs, of course they reacted towards their feelings or towards what they saw, they had their procedure, they respected it, they cooperated with us, we cooperated with them, so there was no problems.

I know that during 1993 in Zagreb the Minister for Health was here, sheik from Saudi Arabia. Was he accommodated here?

I must admit I can't remember. I don't know, I can't confirm it. You can always see it in some hotel documents; you can tell whether they were here. However I can't you....

Tell me one more thing, when we are talking about those people when they were coming, they had requests for special food, special cooking?

Well in some situations there were those classical requests that their diet shouldn't, let's say, have pork on the menu, meaning the part that you can already expect because of their religion, which their civilization defines and style of life. We of course, met their needs, we resourcefully met their needs, it wasn't always

easy, but that part of the job was always done to their satisfaction.

Do you remember, did Alija Izetbegović have somebody that was trying his food?

As far as I can remember, yes.

Yes? He took him with him?

He was, I think, man, even though my colleagues who worked in the kitchen could say more about it, but I believe the man tasting the food was also present when there was a official delegation here and that he was in the kitchen trying his food, and then the food would be taken to him with his security.

Mister Prežec we came to the end of our interview. Do you think we forgot to mention anything or maybe I forgot to ask you something? You can remind me.

Hm, to tell you the truth I don't know whether we've forgotten anything. Maybe if I could add one more thing. Sometimes for a common person, I'm a conditionally said common person, actually in this country; sometimes it's very unusual to talk in this sense, meaning to talk about being different to one person from another. Actually before my employment in this hotel for me it was normal to treat each person equally, no matter what he done in his life, but I suppose there are situations where you have to specially emphasise...

Judging by everything, that's exactly what was happening: towards all the guests you behaved the same...

Exactly that...

It seems that you and your hotel performed your job at a high level, however, here, 2006 it is necessary to say because we are now in a situation where we are suspected that we weren't hospitable. And for that reason, it is necessary to mention these things, simply state the facts that Intercontinental was a respected hotel in Zagreb, in Croatia, that they were hospitable, good host, received all the guests that were coming to them, didn't make any differences and pleased them, as much as they could to please their demands. So let it be recorded.

That's it. Amongst them there are a lot of foreign delegates, ambassadors, and various journalists, international journalists who stayed here and who are such as me a witness to that.

Oh, then I will ask them later. Thank you very much.

Your welcome.

Zagreb, March 2006