

# **MARKO POTREBICA**

**Ljubuški**  
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*Mpotrebica*

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**The interview was conducted in Popovići, Dubrovnik**

**At the beginning of the recording I would like you to state your name, last name and date of birth.**

My name is Marko Potrebica, I was born in Čepikuće, which is the western part of Dubrovnik coast region, municipality of Dubrovnik coast region. Today I am nearly 50 years old, and I joined the war in June of 1991. I instinctively thought that something should be done, because people thought that things that were happening in Croatia at that time are only happening far away from us. I did not think like that, and I guess I was right, not entirely, but mostly. At first I was employed in MUP (cro: Ministarstvo unutarnjih poslova; the Ministry of internal affairs), and on October 1st 1991 I transferred to "K. Tomislav", which was commanded by Mate Šarlija Daidža, that was in Čepikuće. Even though I have had contacts with him before. I was in Čepikuće for 53 days, it was a kind of semi-horseshoe. When on October 4th 1991 Slano fell, they have tried to make a breach toward Čepikuće, but they failed, and then a battle occurred. By my judgement, talking from a time distance, they were more afraid of us then we were actually strong, by them I mean the Chetniks. And so, little by little, they succeeded to make the breach on November 21st 1991 and as I wanted to withdraw to Ston, Daidža told me: "This is it, we should organize an army", and so we made our way to Vrgorac, to a hill named Šibenik. There we had a training ground, we would have our trainings there and that entire area was under the command of the Southern front. To avoid skipping some details, I met Praljak in 1992, along with Božan Šimović, now deceased, who got killed in the "Bura" operation, elevation 690 if I recall well, I still keep that map somewhere, but he was with me in Čepikuće in 1991.

I knew nothing of the man, he left an impression of a firm man, his name and

surname meant nothing to me, I did not know he was an artist, a film director, an actor – to me he was a stranger, as I was to him. But there was something interesting about him, something that pulled me toward him and we got it going, the first meeting was, that I recall, about soldiers, about how many people each of us had, who is who, where we came from, for me the essence of war is comparing powers. That was happening in Herzegovina, I don't know whether it was Međugorje or Čitluk.

**That was an informal association?**

It was an informal association, it was not a pre-arranged meeting. Later on we met in Čapljina barracks. What can I say, I know he was with me, he was holding a megaphone, I wanted to shoot, he wanted to negotiate, and so, he called. Details I can recall at this moment are, I think "Božović, spare or surrender these young people, don't let them die" or something like that. I remember, I think it was on Good Friday of 1992 and one or two days after that they got out part of the people by helicopters. I think young soldiers were there, I don't know the exact number. 30, 38, 28, I cannot really recall, but I think two buses got out, they went toward Split. No one touched these people, nor tried to do anything to them.

**No one even tried?**

No. Praljak explicitly demanded not to touch the prisoners, and so it was. That is one thing I remember about him, it was a difficult situation, people were left on the wire, dead people, you have to collect those dead, strange things start happening to people in such situation. He was strong enough to keep all that under control.

**It was the first time you met Praljak in such harsh circumstances?**

That is correct, that was the first time we met, but I was not in that area until

May of 1993 anyway. After that I went back to command the Border police at the DUBROVNIK – NERETVA POLICE ADMINISTRATION (cro. PU DUBROVAČKO – NERETVANSKA), in the region from Mostar to Osojnik.

**And remained there until the end?**

I was there until the end of the war... I was no longer, later on I was a police officer.

**Have you had any contacts with Praljak afterwards?**

Well, with Praljak I am... As I heard from the media that he is about to go to the Hague, I personally went to greet him. That was after the war.

**That means, after Čapljina... ?**

I had no contacts, no contacts. That was it.

**Can we go back to details in Čapljina barracks, there were fights. How were things, how big were the losses, what were the critical moments in the process of regaining control, and how was Praljak functioning in all that?**

I think, I don't think that he was thinking of his own protection during negotiations, he was exposed, he could have been shot every time he was there. He would go out like a cowboy, exactly like a cowboy, and demanded a surrender, and as we heard whistling sounds, we went into the barracks, I mean our unit went into the barracks. The barracks were a small win, we were afraid because there is an interstice at the entrance, some kind of cypresses, evergreen plants, and we thought I was all mined. As we were coming out, I think the area is called Grabovine, on the north-western entrance, there were canals and some kind of gates on the both sides, and I thought that he was, I don't know, that he was mad, at least in a positive sense, demanding the surrender, I thought that he was going to be shot. Two or three guys were with him, they arrived with him,

and two of them got wounded, severely wounded. He explicitly demanded them to "Surrender and not let...". It's not enough to say that there was shooting, there was heavy fire, from all possible weapons. Praljak was not scared at all, not even a bit. I don't know how he felt inside, but I saw a man who can get shot any second, who is a walking target, and there is a lot of him, he is not exactly a man of small proportions – I don't know what overcame there. He could have been shot. I was more protective of myself than he was of himself. I noticed that.

**Why do you think he was acting like that?**

I don't know, I could not tell.

**Have you thought of that? Have you ever asked him?**

Well, I will tell you one thing. Perhaps he, I wanted, mostly it was "Božović, surrender, don't let these young people die!" That was what he was saying the entire time, maybe it was something else also, but that remained in my memory.

**Was Praljak in command on the basis of any formal documents...?**

Well, I simply don't know of any documents. I mean, to have a document in 1992...? Maybe there was a document.

**Let me rephrase the question: on what grounds would one be accepted as a commander in the fields?**

You should have walked in front of your men! You should have been the one who will get the first bullet.

**And was he like that?**

There was no other way. Look, you cannot be a poser, you either go or you don't go, people sense that. You cannot send someone else to a place you don't want to go. He left a very good impression on me, I have a great respect for such

people, and I also respect the fact that later on they left without any stoning, lynching, spitting. It was a place where people were on the brink, you had to have control over that, and to do something like that in such a moment, that was good, OK, maybe...

**You were there, I was not, and now I am trying to imagine how things were functioning. Would a commander be able to make a difference, that is, to make impact on people, to organize them, to achieve a goal – behaving differently than Praljak was behaving? What would happen if, for instance, he was somewhere behind, if he was hiding?**

No, you cannot do that with people who volunteered to go to war, you cannot do that, those people came, you could not... They know how to use their heads, they know how to protect themselves, those people were not under influence of drugs or alcohol – those people made conscious decision to put their lives at stake and to have a commander who is hiding, who is saying: you should go there, and you should go there – he would not be able to pull that out, no way. This is the way I am looking at it, analyzing the situation: if you are not walking in the front with your men, you have no chance. Because I recall to be at a distance of a meter, or a meter and a half, and heard him calling. And I asked why not break them in a different way, why not hit them instead of calling for surrender. So, that is maybe the most important part that I will remember for a long time.

**Tell me, when that barracks were finally captured, there were soldiers in there, young soldiers, along with a few of more experienced ones, and the capitulation was done. How was surrender of these people organized, that is, was Praljak present when it happened?**

Praljak was present, and it was too civilized, considering it was war. I can tell you that afterwards, when people got out, prisoners, no one touched them, no one laid one finger on them! Do you know what that means? For me, it did not

look like war, it looked like...

**How so? I know that people were bitter, fights were lasting for a long time, people got killed and hurt, because they were firing at everything: how did happen that the prisoners got out and no one touched them?**

Look, he was shouting both asking Božović to surrender and asking our men not to touch them. It was the same, the same rhetoric, only the sides were different. I can still hear it today, like he is standing in front of me... that is how it was.

**And you heard Praljak shouting something to our side. What was he shouting?**

He was shouting: "Do not touch the prisoners, these are young soldiers, there's no Chetniks here" and some other things: "This has to be changed, there are our people there also", something in that sense, that was it, I don't know what else to say, I have no idea.

**So Praljak was shouting to both sides? He was actually constantly...?**

It was an unrewarding role, to keep all that under control, it was an enormous success and I respect that, it is always good to avoid new victims. That is good.

**How did our people react on Praljak insisting to treat the prisoners in that way, without harming them? Was there any opposition, were people surprised?**

It is always like that, because people come up with various reasons: why not get him, because he would get you if only he could. That is something to be expected. People come to a situation where there is no way ahead and anyone can be in command. And I think that it is very, very important that there were no new victims. Our unit lost 4 men, I think, we found one of them on the wire in the morning, because there was shelling from all sides. So, such was my

encounter with Mr. Praljak, very positive.

**Can we return to the beginning for a second, you were with Daidža?**

Yes.

**How were things like at the beginning? Croats and Muslims were on the same side: how were things with military training, with armament? Can you recall that?**

Well, you see, I spent with Daidža, he came to my house in July of 1991, I did not even know who he was, not even indirectly, he was a total stranger to me, and he asked me: "Are you Marko Potrebica?", I said: "Yes." Then he asked: "Do you have 10 men?" and I said: "I can gather 10 people, but..." and then he said: "It will be war here, we will need to fight." I told him: "Very well, we'll have to fight, but with what, how are we going to fight?" "Nothing, everything will be", this and that... And you know, when someone comes to you, it means a lot, I did not think that, nothing was really being offered, he was the first person that came to me and told me that we will have to fight. I accepted him and we had a good cooperation, there were misunderstandings, there were problems, especially, I recall, the date – I'm sorry that one of my war journals was in that guardsmen uniform and it got all wet and crumbled to pieces – Daidža was not making decisions on his own, I think he was in contact with Zagreb, I even think with Šušak, because I installed a telephone in a small room and heard him talking on the phone. When he would be on the phone, I would go away, but he would told me: "Wait, stop, listen." I was not interested at all, to tell you the truth.

**Why would he ask you to listen to his telephone conversation?**

Maybe he did not want me to suspect that he was hiding something from me, I don't know. It was all functioning well, but I saw that there were problems when

he pulled the army out of that area. The training ground was there, the Guard was in Čepikuće, and I remember them as good boys: Mladen Jurković, Marko Mujan, the late Božan Šimović. And then one day Daidža sent them all toward Dubrovnik, he sent some of them to Osojnik, Mladen Jurković on Brdet, and we were left with couple of people. I asked him what was going on, who will defend that area, and he told me he had to do it. Very well then, if you had to do it, OK, we had disagreements, even more intense scuffles, but we let it go. Afterwards I asked him to give me a group of people to go on the area up there and he told me: "Do not enter Herzegovina by no means, if you want to go there, put on a JNA uniform (cro: Jugoslavenska narodna armija, Yugoslav People's Army). OK, I understood that we should not enter the foreign country, but after October 1st of 1991 I did not understand that anymore, because the majority of grenades, that is, brunts, were coming from BiH (cro: Bosna i Hercegovina, Bosnia and Herzegovina), it was as if you would shoot at me from your window, and I would not even be allowed to brake your window or to shoot back at you, you are not at range, I don't even have a slingshot to target you. At that point I realized that war is a big game. Daidža and I had a big conflict, but we continued to the end. We had fights, but we were never at feud. That way of reasoning, that we should not enter the territory of BiH. This was a shallow zone, Čepikuće and the first village in Herzegovina, you could throw a rock over that area. And then problems started occurring, I realized that it was a dirty war, it was horrible, a disaster, they were throwing countless, countless grenades, and we had no means to respond, we were not allowed to get close and do something in that zone, we were not allowed to enter the territory of BiH.

**The volunteer regiment had military training centers, that is, people were trained. Where were these centers?**

The training centers were in... the place was called Dragljane, it was on the road from Vrgorac to Imotski.

**Dragljane ?**

Dragljane, and the hill is called Šibenik.

**There were two centers?**

No, no, the place is called Dragljane, the hill is called Šibenik.

**So that was the training center. Were there any more such centers?**

Not that I know. There was a rehabilitation facility in Baška Voda, and nothing else.

**Were many Muslims in these training centers?**

Quite a lot.

**Is there an estimation on the number? How many of them were there?**

I cannot tell, I have a book, not a book, it is a notebook with the schedule of everyday activities where I can see who was appointed the sentry duty, who was appointed to maintain vehicles, who was appointed to operate the sniper and other duties, and there was a large number of Muslims there. I have names, at the moment I cannot say how many. I have them in my notebook.

**Do you still have that notebook?**

Well, I do, I am sure there are a couple of names in there, I cannot tell how many at this moment.

**Is it possible to make a copy of that notebook?**

It is. I absolutely can search through that papers and find names of people included in the unit, people that were,

**Are there any documents on armaments, who was entrusted with what**

**weapon?**

Well, the documents on armaments, who was entrusted with what. An effort should be made here, I have nothing on that, I was not entrusted with any armaments. I remember one time when the late Daidža asked me to transfer one part of armaments across western Herzegovina, I think. A man arrived to Dragljane, he came with a list and he asked me to "give him the organ-pipes" or something in that sense, I remember that evening, but I cannot recall how much of that was there. That went. I know Muslims were.

**Was that transferred in a passenger car, a truck, a trailer-truck?**

I think it was a van. But the quantity of armaments, that I don't know. I have nothing on armaments, because I had no contacts with armaments, I was more active in operative jobs within the unit, so I have nothing on armaments, I am sure I have nothing. I will look into it, regarding the names, I am sure the names are in there, but I don't know how many of them are there, 15, 20, 30, I don't know. I have it sorted by dates, I even saw one occasion, a man was late and I made a note of that.

**People were united then, they were working together. How were things with Muslims? Were there any tensions?**

No.

**There were no tensions? How many Muslims were there, approximately?**

Who ever joined us, was accepted, there were several Muslims in Čepikuće. I know that the first men around Daidža were Muslims, in Čepikuće, people he brought with him, they were great guys, correct people. If their lunch would not arrive, I would give them food from my house. One of them is still here, I come across him occasionally, and the rest of them I did not see after the war.

**Good, I don't know the exact number, but there was a group, a quite large group, of Muslims in that unit, is that right?**

Yes.

**Were they performing their religious rituals, did they have a special way of taking food, was there a noticeable diversity within the unit?**

No. I noticed no such things.

**For instance, how did people address the need for prayer?**

Believe me, I don't even know where they were praying. No one was forbidden to pray. I have no idea. I never had any problems with these people.

**Later on, when conflicts started, that religious difference was being especially emphasized. Was that difference noticeable before, during the period we are talking about?**

I did not notice that. If I was working with a man for a certain period of time, if he was a soldier, and he was doing his part of the job, without complaining to anything... Look, in "L. Pavlović" I was the deputy commander for operative activities. I never had a situation where someone would tell me that they are being mistreated for religious reasons, or that they are not being given something they need or want, not one single situation like that.

Maybe someone did that later, some people are skilled orators and can do things that resonate, and people accept that. Talking of the war between Muslims and Croats, I have no idea what was my place in that – maybe someone was preparing for that war, but on the places I was no one ever mentioned that it will come to that war. I was absolutely surprised by what happened.

**Was Daidža also surprised?**

I don't know, I was on good terms with him. We had our misunderstandings, he

was a difficult person, he was noisy at times and used too much words, OK, that is all fine, but he never told me anything, except this: "It is a good thing you left before the war with Muslims, because this is a Devil's war". I really cannot tell what he meant by that. And regarding the relations between people, Muslims and others, even Daidža himself, I always felt that he was treating us and them in the same way. He was not making any differences between people, and everything was fine from the beginning to the end, where it went wrong... If I knew where it went wrong, I would say it right away, but I don't know. To me it was a surprise, and even today, after thinking about it, after analyzing the information, I could not tell where that evil came from.

**Mister Marko, we are finishing our conversation, is there something we forgot to mention, something I forgot to ask, something you think should be mentioned?**

I don't know, people always forget something. You cannot forget the war, but you surely forget some details from the war. We are all criminals, looking at it like that, when someone says you are a criminal – but later on, after things get analyzed, it all comes to nothing.

September 2005, Zagreb