

VAJDANA TOMIĆ

Mostar

October 2006

The interview has been recorded, and the record is filed under

tomicdr

13.1 MB

duration 41:13

The interview was conducted in Mostar

The recorder is on. Could you please first state for the record your first and last name, date and place of birth, place of residence and occupation??

Vajdana Tomić, born on December 19th, 1961 in Široki Brijeg. I currently work as a gynecologist and I am the head of the gynecology ward of the Mostar clinic.

That is where you work now?

That is where I work.

Did I get the name right, Vajdana?

Yes, that is correct.

The topic of this interview is the indictment issued in Hague against “the six”. More specifically, I am an investigator for the team defending Slobodan Praljak. It would be good if we could talk about the war period, about the things you have witnessed, about the events you are certain about. Can we go back to that time? My first question would be the location you were at during the war years, where were you when the war started, and what were you doing at that time?

When the war started, I was working as a doctor at Medical Center in Široki Brijeg and I stayed there to help the wounded and the sick, as a doctor and an altruist.

First few months into the war, I was appointed chief of medical staff of the 2nd HVO brigade. I would just like to mention that this was the brigade with the highest number of casualties and wounded in this region.

When were you appointed chief of medical staff?

I was appointed chief of medical staff in autumn of 1992, during the Serbian aggression.

Let us do a little chronological overview and then go back to details. So, you were appointed chief of medical staff for 2nd HVO brigade in autumn 1992. How long did you perform these duties?

I was the chief of medical staff until December 1993.

And after that?

After that I went back to work at the Mostar hospital.

And you stayed there until the end of the war, that is were you work now too?

Yes. I have been working at the Mostar hospital since January 1994. And I still

work there.

You were a member of the 2nd HVO brigade during the entire 1992-1993 period?

Yes.

You worked at the Medical Center in Široki Brijeg, for 2nd HVO brigade and at the Mostar hospital. Which period do you consider to be the hardest one for you, as a human being and a doctor... or the most important one?

The hardest one was the summer of 1993, which means the conflict with the Muslims. For me, as the head of the medical staff, the worst night was, I cannot remember the exact date, when the Muslims, members of HVO and members of my brigade, as well as my Muslim colleagues, doctors and medical workers, took Croatian people, both soldiers and the members of the medical staff, doctors and medical workers, as prisoners in Bijelo Polje and North camp.

Where were you that night?

I was on the right bank of Neretva. The brigade medical headquarters were located in the North camp, as well as the main, central infirmary. The infirmary of the 2nd battalion was located in Vrapčići, and the infirmary of the 1st battalion was located in Bijelo Polje. The Muslims took control of those three infirmaries that night, and they faced the most resistance at the North camp infirmary. My first cousin was the orderly at the brigade medical headquarters that night, doctor Teo Tomić. My cousin Vjenco Tomić was also there, he was a driver and was seriously wounded. Anyway, despite all the badly wounded and the Calvary the members of the medical staff that were taken prisoners went through that night, luckily, no one was killed. At least as far as the medical staff was concerned.

What were your duties at the Medical Center in Široki Brijeg? What did your work day look like?

I had to take care of the civilians. When required, we would do fieldwork, at the first line of defense. During the first months, the most dramatical part of it were the JNA bombings.

Which problems would the civilians come to you for? Were these the usual medical problems or were they more complicated?

These were completely chaotic times. The problems were certainly

different during that period. The bombings remained etched in my memory as the most dramatic part. Even though we were not ready for this war, we would improvise as we went along. We were not prepared for the war, we had to manage by using our knowledge, spirit, intelligence. It was all very different.

Were there any refugees during that period?

Yes. Thank you for reminding me of that. Mostar was under siege and times were hard there because of the Serbian aggression, so the people were escaping the city toward Gorjanci. They would come to the temporary infirmary and would then be transported to our Medical Center. We would take care of these people at the Medical Center in Široki Brijeg. I remember buses of Bosnian refugees that would come to the school which was located near the Medical Center. We often had to help there.

Was it only Croatian people that needed help?

No. They were mostly Muslim.

What state were they in? What was it that they needed?

Medically speaking, there were cases of viral infection, diarrhea, psychological reaction to stress.

Were there any cases of skin disease?

I think so.

Which age groups are we talking about: children, women, the elderly, men capable of military duty?

There were all kinds of people, but mostly women, children and the elderly.

How long did this last?

From April to September. I left in October.

Which regions did the refugees come from, the ones that were staying in the school?

I must admit that I cannot say for sure. It made no difference to us then. We helped everyone and made no difference between patients.

What was the situation with the medical supplies like? Medicines, capacity, and everything else needed to help people like these?

We did what we could. We would improvise using the donations. We managed.

When you say it like that, it sounds as if it was simple. Was it really simple or did it take a lot of effort? Was your position extremely stressful or did you consider it to be normal?

The whole situation was stressful. There was a shortage of supplies, but we managed somehow. Things functioned.

Where did you get the medical supplies you needed?

Primarily the donations which we got from the very beginning. I am not sure which channels they came through, but we would get them somehow. I must mention frior Jozo Zovko. A lot of supplies came through him, he was the head of the monastery back then. I would go as far as to say that our situation was better than elsewhere because we had frior Jozo Zovko.

Did everything go through him?

No, I wouldn't say that. In general, the supplies came from Croatia.

Were there any Arabian humanitarian organizations back then and did you have any kind of relations with them?

I don't think so.

Did these donations include expired medicine and other supplies? Do you remember that?

I think that there were such supplies. I am sure there were some.

So you have noticed that. It was obviously a widespread problem which was very common. When helping people, did you make any difference based on gender, nationality, religion or anything else...

Absolutely not! I can say that with all certainty.

Everyone that needed help, got help?

Yes.

That was what happened at the Medical Center in Široki Brijeg. After that, you were appointed the head of the 2nd HVO brigade medical staff, is that right?

Yes, that is correct.

You said at the beginning that this brigade suffered the largest losses.

Yes.

Do you know the exact number?

I cannot say for sure, but I know what it was like in comparison with other brigades.

Where were you stationed during the period of your involvement with the 2nd brigade?

The brigade was becoming more structured, and I established the medical headquarters. I have already mentioned the brigade medical headquarters,

the infirmary at the North camp which used to be JNA barracks. There were five battalions and each one had its own infirmary. I will start with the 5th battalion. This was the Ilići battalion and they had their infirmary in Ilići. The 1st Bijelo Polje battalion had its infirmary in Bijelo Polje or Potoci. The 2nd Vrapčiči battalion had its infirmary in Vrapčiči, 3rd Cim battalion had its infirmary in Rudnik, which is a part of Mostar. During October and November, we organized doctors, medical workers, infirmaries.

You were the one who organized and coordinated all this. What were the biggest problems you were faced with?

The biggest problem for me, as a doctor and the head of the medical headquarters, were human resources. There weren't a lot of doctors in Mostar, both Muslim and Croatian. A Muslim colleague was the doctor at the 5th battalion. Doctor Kreso was in the 1st battalion, who was already there when I was appointed head of the medical staff. There was also doctor Dino Vlaho. In general, we managed to organize things.

You were there from autumn 1992 until the end of 1993. At the beginning of that period, was there any kind of tension between Muslims and Croats, your doctors and medical teams or did the things function well?

Things were working out. I had a great trust in doctor Kreso, and was objected for it later on by many. He did his medical duties properly, but he was the key actor in that uprising, I would say, an armed Muslim uprising, during that night when they took Croatian prisoners in Bijelo Polje. It was Kreso who took Croatian staff as prisoners. There are witnesses from Bijelo Polje, members of the 1st battalion who were captured. They can corroborate this, that doctor Kreso started the uprising.

Can you tell me when did this uprising take place? You said you did not recall the exact date. Can you give us any clue as to when this happened?

In June 1993.

Let us go back to technical details of organizing the medical staff. You said that you were faced with a staff shortage. In comparison with the Medical Center in Široki Brijeg, what was the supplies situation like?

Since Mostar was no longer under siege, as during the Serbian aggression, supply lines and communication were much faster. I got our supplies from the war hospital storage. Supplies weren't that big of a problem. Human resources were a much serious issue.

Did you get any help in terms of human resources from elsewhere or did you have to use what you had?

It was difficult to assume that any doctor would want to come to Mostar at that time. There was no financial motivation, only the altruistic, ideological motivation.

Could we now focus on the beginning of Croatian-Muslim conflict? You said that there was an uprising in June 1993, but we will talk about that later. Before June, were there any clues that things were moving in that direction?

I did not notice anything like that. I would say that everything was functioning perfectly well in Bijelo Polje. The people of Bijelo Polje, both Croatian and Muslim, went through the Calvary of Serbian aggression. They had to leave their homes, their houses were burned to the ground, lot of people were captured, many went missing. I think that this common misfortune united them and things functioned perfectly. I really was not able to notice anything of any significance, apart from the information we would hear about certain tension and conflicts. That started in the spring. And it was a bit upsetting for me personally, as well as for the others.

But your teams continued with their work, regardless of this...?

Yes. This colleague, Kreso, the one I was repudiated for, he performed all his medical duties. Unfortunately, during that night, he was one of the men who prepared the whole thing.

Where were you during that night?

I was on the right bank. During that time I had no orderly duties because I was already appointed head of the medical staff, unless there was a need for such a thing, of course. That morning was a total chaos: I first went to the Suspension bridge across Neretva, because this was a transport line from the North camp towards the hospital, so I went to see what was happening with the men from the brigade medical headquarters.

Did you have any information about this?

It was difficult. Telephone lines were cut, we had no mobile phones back then. You had to go there in person and see what was happening. And I found some men in the hospital. I already mentioned Vencel Tomić who was our driver and was badly wounded that night.

You found men from your medical team...

...who were in the brigade medical headquarters at the North camp, in the hospital.

Were you able to talk to them?

I found them in the hospital, and I spoke to them. They have already been transferred...

What did they say? What happened? What was the first information you got from them?

My biggest concern was who was alive, who was wounded. I knew that the Muslims had captured the North camp and that whole side, that there was a Muslim uprising. What I was worried about was what happened to the men, to the mentioned driver Tomić who was badly wounded, to the members of the medical staff, soldiers, civilians. No one knew anything about men from the medical headquarters in Bijelo Polje. My next step was to get from the right bank, with driver Omer, a Muslim from Bijelo Polje, in a Lada estate, via Goranci and Đubran, through the mountains, towards Bijelo Polje. The people who saw me in Mostar, leaving momentarily with Omer for the woods, were frightened by my reaction.

You weren't thinking?

I simply was not able to analyze things at that moment...

Did you make a wrong decision?

No. Omer's family was in Sweden, they have left before the war started. He had a brother there so his wife and daughter left for Sweden when the war against JNA started. He helped me during those first days. Everything was very hectic, men were missing, they have been captured, I was the only one left as the head of the medical staff. Omer was both my driver and a nurse until things got better. People of Bijelo Polje were mistrustful. If I did not have a certain medical credibility, I would have had to let Omer go. Croatian people from Bijelo Polje were mistrustful, their families have been captured over the night, Muslims stabbed them in the back, so to say. Omer understood

this and after those first days, we agreed that he should go to his family in Sweden. He went there and I continued to communicate with him. Few years back, they invited me to come and visit them in Sweden, but I was not able to go.

Omer is still in Sweden?

Yes.... So I got to this hill with Omer, Đubrani. That was actually the first time I was there. At the foot of the hill, there were civilians who had left their homes during the night because they were afraid they were going to be killed or taken prisoners. They were in bad shape, desperate. There were 2-3 vehicles from the hospital, but people did not dare get down from Đubrani towards Neretva. And the Muslims, now the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, were located on the other side. It was dangerous, but I got down there with Omer. I got the information that the people from the medical headquarters were taken prisoners. The only thing I could do then was to arrange with the people of Bijelo Polje this medical admission center at Marica House and the Neretva bridge. After that, I went back with Omer to get the medical supplies, as much as we were able to fit in the car. So, in the next few days, I improvised and established this new infirmary at Marica House.

Since we are talking about these unexpected events that happened in June 1993, it would be good to establish once again whether you, as a doctor, were able to assume that such a thing would happen within a common team? Were there things that pointed to it? You said that there were certain rumors?

There were rumors. The entire situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was such that one could assume such a thing, but I was not able to do so when it came to our medical staff nor was I able to assume that doctor Kreso would be the key actor in such events.

There were no indications, official warnings to remove Muslim members of the staff, something like that? Was there any such information?

No. Bijelo Polje was absolutely functional, according to my opinion, which does not represent any kind of professional security assessment. Bijelo Polje was in a certain way a phenomenon. The Calvary that the both sides have been through because of the Serbian aggression united

them. I do not know what the official reports said...

We are not interested in those. We are just considering things you have witnessed, things you know about, not the others. This uprising among the medical team, was it an isolated even on one location or did it happen on several sites simultaneously?

On one location, in Bijelo Polje. These two infirmaries were on the right bank, only one driver and a medical technician were located in Vrapčići. In Bijelo Polje, there were two doctors, doctor Kreso and doctor Dino Vlaho.

They were both there at the same time?

Yes, but doctor Vlaho was taken prisoner. He was later in a concentration camp, he was taken prisoner on the left bank, along with the others.

They have taken him right there, while he was on duty?

Yes.

We are getting close to the end of our interview and I would like to ask you to finish this story about doctor Kreso. You have mentioned that he was one of the key actors. In which way was he important in this uprising, what do you remember about him?

The people of Bijelo Polje witnessed these events, people who were taken prisoners that night and doctor Vlaho. I found out about it from them later on.

What did Kreso do that night?

He was armed that night as well as the others...

Who were the others?

Muslim members of the HVO.

So, together with other Muslim members of the formation.

Armed members...

Was doctor Kreso armed?

Yes. He was one of the key actors.

So he was making decisions?

Yes.

So, he was armed, even though he was performing his medical duties as a doctor, and he had an active part in the uprising?

Yes.

Where is doctor Kreso today?

I think he works for a hospital on the left bank in Mostar.

Do you still have any kind of contact with him, as a doctor?

We saw each other briefly once, in Hotel Ero. I had no information about his whereabouts for a long time after that. Later on I heard that he was working at a hospital on the left bank. I think he lives in Bijelo Polje now.

He did not come back to this hospital?

No.