

JOSIP ZEKO

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**Ljubuški**

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**The interview has been recorded, the recording is kept under the code name**

*jozeko*

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**The interview took place in Gornji Vakuf Uskoplje**

**I will ask you at the beginning of the recording to introduce yourself, your name and surname, date and place of birth and current place of residence.**

My name is Josip Zeko. I was born on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1969 in Gornji Vakuf, Paloč, Gornji Vakuf.

**How did the war begin for you, i.e. where were you at the beginning of war events?**

Well, let's put it this way, at the beginning of the war I was a student in Zagreb. With the beginning of the hostilities here in BIH there was a group of students, all from Uskoplje, we studied in Zagreb and we organized ourselves up there in Zagreb and came down here to Uskoplje in an organized way, starting by forming a professional regiment "Ante Bruno Bušić". That was April 1992 and onwards. At the time of the forming of this regiment, I held the duty, at the very beginning I held the duty of Commander of a scout squad, and at the end of 1992 – when one of our superior officers was seriously wounded and was left without a leg – I took over the duties of deputy Commander of a scout company which was called the "Alpha force". As regards the structure, we were only a part, part of a battalion "Zvonko Krajina". In all, the regiment "Ante Bruno Bušić" at that time had 5 battalions, one was in Široko, then Posušje, Livno, Žepče and Uskoplje. We were one company of the battalion "Zvonko Krajina" in Uskoplje, which was part of the regiment "Ante Bruno Bušić". We were real scouts and we did a lot of scouting work in May, June 1992. At the beginning of the hostilities we did a lot of scouting assignments on the areas of Uskoplje, Bugojno, it means, we worked a lot for the Brigade "Dr. Ante Starčević". All with the agreement of our commanders. According to need.

**It means, if I understood you correctly, you come here in April 1992 when the regiment is formed and an organization is developing. What were the first assignments of the scouts at that time?**

When we came we had one training camp on Pidriš where we started with the reception of new members, with the training, education, arming. This was the middle of April, perhaps the period between 15<sup>th</sup> April until 1<sup>st</sup> May, in that period. Kupres fell sometime around 10<sup>th</sup> April and that was the period from 10<sup>th</sup> April, it means after the fall of Kupres. It was a period of general chaos, people were fleeing, a large part of the civilians from Bugojno, here from Gornji Vakuf, Uskoplje fled into Croatia, into Dalmatia. My parents were also among them. A lot of places were deserted, because the expectations were that the Serbs will move from Kupres in this direction. However, the Serbs stopped and it was a period when the lines were not yet formed, it was not known with certainty where the Serbs had stopped, how far they came, and then here in Uskoplje the forming of the units began, the organization of defence. There were some crisis headquarters, the arming began and then we got the assignment, sometime by the end of April, we got the assignment to go scouting the area of Raduša, Raduški Kamen. We then went to Raduški Kamen. We were the first to come to Raduški Kamen and we found out that there are no positions there, the Serbs did not come up there and then we started with the forming of the line up on Raduški Kamen, on this part of the Uskoplje Municipality which is linked with Kupres. It means, this is that period, the end of April, beginning of May and then when we established a line up there, then we did some reconnaissance work in front of the line. We had to find out where the Serbs are, where their positions are, are they also involved in reconnaissance activities, do they have patrols and the like. After we took the area up there, the members of the Brigade "Ante Starčević" came there and took the position, first of all on Raduški Kamen. At the beginning only one position was kept, and this position was later linked down here toward the Bugojno Municipality over Oglavić and down over Oglavak, toward Ivica Planinica, towards Skrte and so on.

**Was it a difficult time, with regard to the fact that you are coming from Zagreb, you are young. How much training did you receive? Did you have time to complete your training? The pressure on you must have been hard at that moment. How do you remember those times, it means, we are talking about April, May, June 1992?**

Well, I don't know, I was very young then and it was all a bit interesting for me. But it was difficult – I only remember that we were every day out in the field, and we walked daily some 20, 30 kilometres – and we were all the time sweating, wet, tired. This is what I remember from that period.

**Did you have any losses in that period?**

In that period there were no losses. No loss of human lives.

**In that period, in that whole organization: the establishment of the lines, reconnaissance and the like, who participated in that? Were the scouts Croats, were there any Muslims, who were the members?**

In that period I can say with certainty that on this area, as regards the defence toward the Serbs, up there, toward Kupres, there was no one, no one from the Muslim side.

**Why? They were physically present there?**

Well, physically they were present. The first village below the Raduša is Voljice, which is basically of Muslim majority, there are many more Muslims than Croats, why they were not in our unit I don't know, I don't know the real reasons. I know the reasons why they were not coming forth later, a month, two three later. Their excuses were that at that time they were not sufficiently equipped, that they are not

armed, that they have logistical problems. Simply, they claimed at that time that they are not armed, that they are not organized and the like. Actually, in those times, April, May, I didn't come into much of a contact with them, so I couldn't talk to anybody.

**You never met them, in the work that you were doing?**

Correct. No. I never saw them and they were not there, 100% they were not there. None of their people.

**On the training in Pidriš, they were not there?**

They were not at the training.

**But, sometime in May you had a task to go toward Prusac, is that so?**

Well, it was like this. I can only say that after the lines were formed here in this area of the Uskoplje Municipality toward Kupres, we got the assignment to go down there to Bugojno. In Bugojno we reported in the Headquarters, the Headquarters of the then HVO and on order we went down to Prusac.

**What is Prusac, and what is Ajvatovica? Can we clarify this a bit?**

I don't know a lot about Prusac, I didn't read any specialist literature, but what I know: Prusac is an old locality, and old medieval settlement for which they say that it had waterworks even before Paris. Now, whether this is true I don't know, but there we are. There is a fortress there, and old town, but it is interesting that...

### **What is the composition of the residents?**

It is a 100% Muslim village. It means, 100% Muslim village. It is interesting that this village belongs to Donji Vakuf, the Donji Vakuf Municipality, but in the period when we came, Donji Vakuf already fell. It means, the Serbs had taken it, I think it fell at the beginning of May, I don't know the exact date, but it literally fell without a single bullet being fired. Although the ratio of the population was in favour of the Muslims, I think it was 65% : 35% a Muslim majority, and simply, the town fell without a bullet being fired – but the village of Prusac remained, the people remained, the civilians remained and they didn't want to retreat, they didn't want to flee, although they were tactically in a totally unfavourable position. They were in a valley, and the Serbs were, on their northern side there was a position and a small settlement called Urija. Here the Serbs had dug in. In front of them there was another small place, Koš, and to the left of them were Koščani. When we came down there, they were being shelled every day – not intensively, but occasionally grenades would fall on the village. But it is interesting that the village did not want to retreat when we came down there...

### **What was the reason, why did you go to them?**

We went there also to help in the forming of the lines, in the forming of the defence. It means, we simply came to help these people in every respect, with respect to defence, structuring, then, let's say, they were here and they stayed and defended themselves, but they didn't know exactly where the Serbs were, except that they were shelling them from Koščani and from Urija. Our task was to get in touch with these people and to help them in the defence and the establishment of the lines and the defence. Not only with regard to that village, but the entire area, Prusac and this part upwards that leads from Prusac to Kupres, toward Kupreška Vrata up here. This is a large area, this is the forest,

this is the entire Koprivnica. When we came down there...

**What was the situation like when you came down there?**

It was interesting, they had a great will for defence. It means, they had the morale, they had the will, but they were not well equipped, nor armed, really they weren't. Although they had something, it was all too little. Apart from the domestic population here was a group of a dozen people from Kupres, 10 to 15 men from Kupres, also Muslims, who came down to Prusac after the fall of Kupres, or they had some family there, but there were some 10 to 15 able men.

**And they integrated?**

They integrated. We came in contact with the Commander, I think his name was Besim, I can't remember the surname...

**He was the Commander of the defence...?**

The Commander of the defence in the beginning phase. It was May 1992. We were very, very well received. The people were truly correct towards us.

**So they were glad that you came?**

More than glad. Absolutely. They provided us with accommodation, they provided us with food. We had one room where they cooked for us. In the morning we would go scouting up toward Kupres, or we leave, take some mines, we had a lot of mines, we mined the positions towards Urija with anti-personnel mines, this road leading down toward Donji Vakuf we mined with anti-tank mines and the like. And in the afternoon when we come back there was always a cooked lunch waiting for us. I even remember having my hair cut by a girl who worked part time

as a hairdresser. So that these relations were more than good. We really felt welcome there and it was obvious...Like, you walk down the street, you see a man is looking at you, and you see that he is glad that you are there. Rarely in this entire war were we so warmly received as we were received there. This is a fact.

**Did you ever return to Prusac afterwards?**

No, never.

**You didn't wish to?**

Well...I have a wish, but, somehow I don't have the time and so. I would like to, to sit down with several of those lads who were there at the beginning, to sit down a bit, to exchange stories. That I would like. But somehow, I never seem to find the time for that.

**Apart from your daily reconnaissance work did you do anything else in Prusac? What were your other duties? Did you conduct any trainings? Did you arm someone there?**

Well, no, we didn't arm them. We didn't arm them for the simple reason that we were a unit who came there to do the scouting, to determine exactly where the Serbs are positioned, to determine where to establish our positions, to establish those positions so that they can be fortified later and such things. As we had pretty good experience with mines, and we had this materiel then we mined certain areas, because what we feared at the very beginning...we knew what had happened on Kupres. It means, on Kupres the Serbs invaded with tanks and we feared they will again invade Prusac from the direction of Donji Vakuf with tanks. This was not much that we had, we couldn't mine all the directions that the tanks could take, but it was something, and what we had we used, where we expected that they might

try to pass. Apart from that, one day we even had a planned action of the freeing of Urija, a part of these local members were supposed to go with us, but...

**When was that, was that immediately at the beginning, or a bit later?**

It may have been around 25<sup>th</sup> of May, between 20<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of May. It was sometime in that period. There were problems with these locals. There were not enough men, volunteers, they weren't armed sufficiently and so – and the Serbs had dug in well up there. From this Urija they constantly shelled the village, and then we got the idea that we might try to take it. But, as I say, we were short of manpower, and we cancelled the operation.

**Give me some more details about that! It means, it was supposed to be a joint operation...**

Yes, it was supposed to be a joint operation by us and...

**...Muslims that were there, in that village?**

That is so, that is so.

**Was this action agreed previously?**

Yes. This action was previously agreed. It was agreed in the evening.

**With whom was it agreed? With the Commander?**

With the Commander of the defence of Prusac, with Besim.

**It was agreed with Besim?**

Yes.

**And this plan was adopted, it was like a final thing?**

Yes.

**And what happened later?**

Well, in the morning when we were supposed to go into action, he came and said: "I simply cannot gather enough men who are ready, who wish to go up there!"

**It means, in the morning you got the information that...**

That is so. He personally was sorry, he would have done it gladly, but at that moment he didn't have enough men ready, nor armed, simply ready to do it.

**Did it surprise you at that moment when you found that out, that morning?**

Actually it didn't. You know, there are always a lot of men ready to put on uniforms, but when you have to go on the attack, not many are actually ready.

**Was this the first such action that was jointly planned and was supposed to be realized?**

In Prusac, yes.

**In Prusac?**

In Prusac.

**Were there any attempts after that?**

After that, no. We had no further attempts.

**Did this sudden change in terms of planning an action and its implementation change the relations between you and...?**

No, no, it didn't.

**It didn't?**

Not at all. We were thinking, planning – but in reality we didn't expect much, because it was difficult...Now when I look back with the experience of that whole war which I have been through, maybe it is good that we didn't do it, because it would have been difficult to pass the dug out lines and well equipped Serbian forces. But, at that moment it was as I had told you. After that, nothing changed in our relationship. The relations continued to be good. We continued with the scouting of Koprivnica with greater intensity, it means, the entire area of Koprivnica in the direction of Ajvatovica.

**How far is Ajvatovica?**

Ajvatovica is maybe some 4, 5 kilometres from Prusac. Something like that. It means, there is a path leading up there. Ajvatovica is a well known and the only Muslim sacred site in BIH. Even as a child I had heard of Ajvatovica, but I

didn't know what it was and only then, in Prusac, when I was there people explained to me what Ajvatovica was, that there is a tradition how some 500 years ago a certain Ajvaz Dedo was praying for 40 days and 40 nights and that two rocks separated and that water started flowing from there – and the Muslims every year on a certain date in June go and visit this Ajvatovica. In that period when we went scouting up there, it was an empty space. It means, there was no one up there, and no one knew where the Serbs were, how far they progressed, did they descend, do they plan to attack Prusac from that direction, do they plan to attack Bugojno – and then in that period we often went up there to scout; first to Ajvatovica, then from Ajvatovica over Šipin Most toward Mala Luka and toward Tito's villa in that part, and here to the left we went toward Bilanovića Košare. And at that time, it was also interesting that the Serbs did not descend down here, and after this reconnaissance that we did and the reports that we sent also to the Bugojno Brigade, after that the lines were established in that area, but only they were a bit late, so we came out on Mala Šuljaga and from there to the left. The Serbs had already descended to Mala Koprivnica and to Bilanovića Koš, in the meantime. It was one period of May, then the whole month of May, I remember that on 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1992, it means, on Tito's birthday, the Youth Day, I was in Tito's villa. Actually, Serbs came sporadically, their group would come occasionally into Tito's villa, and these were the "White Eagles" (*Beli orlovi*) because we, they had some trenches dug out, when we went scouting we saw the traces that they had been there. So we tried to ambush them, we waited for them, but they didn't come. So, after a couple of days we came and saw by these traces that they had been there in the meantime. So that a couple of times we bypassed each other, but this was a period, because I know that on 25<sup>th</sup> of May we were in Tito's villa and I took a pair of crystal glasses from that villa, which I keep to this day as a memory. This is the period which I remember and the dates which I remember. But as I say, our base for all that scouting was Prusac, we were sleeping in Prusac and from Prusac we went to scout toward

Ajvatovica and up there toward Velika Šuljaga, Tito's villa and so on. This was that period.

**So, is this everything that is relevant related to Prusac, Ajvatovice and the activities that you were performing there?**

Maybe I should add just one more thing. It would happen that, I remember one time in Prusac, just as we were coming, Prusac was being shelled by mortar grenades from Urija and a recoilless cannon was firing from Koščani. As we had the mortars, mainly mortars that belong to a squad, oftentimes we would return the fire. We had the men, we used the snipers a bit, exchanged fire and the like.

**For how long were you going to Prusac?**

Well, if we take it that it was at the beginning, that we went there at the beginning of May, and we were until the middle of June, a month and a half we were going to Prusac intensively.

**It means May and until the middle of June?**

May and until the middle of June we were in Prusac.

**What I find it interesting is that at that time some things are actually happening which later culminate with the first clashes between the Croats and Muslims. When do these first clashes take place?**

Well, the first armed conflict between the Croats and the Muslims occurred, as far as I remember on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1992. Before that there was an incident on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1992 which had not been elucidated to this very day and the precise circumstances

are still unknown. Namely, in that period the lines were established on Raduša, on Raduški Kamen, but these lines were not well connected. It means, the trenches were not connected in a way that every trench visually covers the neighbouring trench. It was not the classical line, but these were more like points of resistance. On 28<sup>th</sup> May 1992 four officers of the HVO who were members of the Brigade Command – now I don't know exactly who held which position, but as far as I remember among them was Marko Jurić called Mak who was then on the position of Commander, as far as I remember, I am not 100% sure, maybe there were some changes at that time, but I think he was on the position of Commander of the Brigade "Ante Starčević", then there was Vlado Gavranović who was in charge of artillery in the Brigade, there was Zvonimir Krajina Fontana and another captain, I don't know exactly his name, I only know that he was a Muslim and a member of the HVO Headquarters in Gornji Vakuf Uskoplje and that he had been captain in the JNA, that he came together with Marko Jurić from Croatia and that he originally came from Posavina. It means, they went to make a tour of the line and somewhere, maybe 500, 600 metres before Raduški Kamen there was an ambush and all four were killed. This was on 28<sup>th</sup> May, we were then in Prusac, and the Commander of Prusac, Besim brought this information to us that some officers of the HVO had been killed. There were many stories around this, uncertainties, because some 15, 20 minutes before they came a shift of some 20, 30 soldiers passed along this route and they were not shot at from the ambush site. And these men were shot at, which left room for doubt that it was a setup, or someone communicated that they were coming, there were stories that the Muslims had been waiting for them, that the Muslims killed them and such stories...

**Yes, all kinds of stories.**

All kinds of stories. It means, they were killed, there were a lot of traces, it means it was an ambush. Later when we came to investigate the ground, we

determined certain things – it was a classical, military ambush, an L-shaped one.

**But it was not known for certain how these men were killed?**

Well, it was not known for certain. Simply, when we came to the site, we determined that the ambush had been set up in L-shape. It means, someone did it in the classical military manner, it means someone who knew. Someone who was professional, militarily trained and you could see by the cartridges, and not only by the cartridges, but you could see on the places where these men waited in ambush, there were 3, 4 cigarette butts on one place which means that these men had waited for a much longer time, and these men surely let the column of soldiers pass, the shift which was also militarily vulnerable. Do you know how people go on their shift? The rifles are hanging from the shoulder, and now if the intent was to make a diversion, to kill as many men as they could, they could have killed many more had they fired on the shift, although a Jeep is more vulnerable, but it was interesting how there were a lot of uncertainties related to this. Just imagine the situation where they kill the Brigade Commander and maybe two or three key people from the Headquarters. We later got the assignment to go and investigate a bit, scout the terrain which led toward the Serbs. We went, we went down and found traces, traces of food where they ate and these traces actually did come from the Serbian direction, but it could never be determined for certain who did it.

**All right, but what is of essence, what we can conclude: it means four men from the HVO Command were killed and it is not known how they were killed...**

That is so.

**...it is not known and you say that various stories were circulating...?**

There were various stories, yes.

**I presume that this event additionally raised the tensions which later culminate?**

Well, I wouldn't put it that way, but it raised a mistrust between Croats and Muslims.

**A mistrust?**

A mistrust. Let's say, some relations that existed between the Croats and the Muslims, which were not brilliant in the past, and when something like this happens then it deepens, the suspicions and mistrust sets in.

**Before we continue on further developments in the relations between the Croats and the Muslims on this area – can we just touch upon the pre-war period, in which way did the Croats and the Muslims live here?**

Well, it's what I said, it is apparent when you look at the town how it was built and who lives where...

**You must tell me which town are you referring to.**

I am referring to Gornji Vakuf Uskoplje, then you will see that you have literally a line, a drawn line, you follow, between the Muslim part of the town and the Croatian part of the town. It is interesting that in the Muslim part there is not a single Croatian house, there were a couple of houses in the new settlement in Odvode, but even that was sold after the war. In the Croatian part of the town you have maybe four, five Muslim houses. It means, as far as this is concerned, the town was always divided, and I remember, since my childhood it was always

like that: the town was divided. As far as relations between the Muslims and the Croats are concerned they functioned – in quotation marks – but there were always some conflicts along this national, religious, what shall I call it – basis, but these conflicts were always there, from the times of my father... You didn't dare at night, in the darkness pass through a Muslim village if you were going to see your girlfriend, for instance.

**What would have happened?**

They would have beaten you up.

**And this was usual?**

This was at the time... I know these stories from the time when my father was a boy, and when they were going to see their girlfriends, sometimes they went to the third village, over the hills, that's how it used to be. Simply, you knew through which villages you shouldn't pass, and you had to circumvent them, otherwise, you might end being beaten up.

**Was that how they lived?**

That's how they lived. Since the Turkish times, these relations, there were these conflicts between the Croats and the Muslims. In recent times, when I was a boy – I lived in a village where there were two, three Muslim houses around my house, but it was a majority Croatian village. But I know that oftentimes there were fights in the town: it means, fights between the Croats and the Muslims. And it wasn't so rare, these fights were frequent. One of the better known fights happened in 1986 or 1987 when between 50 and 80 men participated on both sides.

**All together 50 to 80 men?**

All together, maybe 30 – 40 on one side, 30 – 40 on the other...

**Sounds like a lot of people!**

I am speaking about this particular case because some of my school friends took part in that, so that I know what happened. Namely, the fight occurred in front of a discotheque which was held by Mešak. Now, I don't know how they started, maybe the initial conflict was between individuals, one or two, and later it flared up, it might have been between two or three on one side and two or three on the other – but it developed into a major fight with 30 – 40 people on one side and 30 – 40 on the other. It was a mass fight and there were lathes, hands, this and that...

**No one was killed?**

No one was killed, but I think that two of them ended up in a hospital with a concussion of the brain. And it went so far that at that time the local police which was pretty strict at those times could not resolve this situation, so the Republic Police was coming due to the fact that it was a major fight with national background, then many were tried in court as juveniles and so on...

**The fact that there were no killed we can probably thank to the fact that they only used lathes, stones and not...?**

Yes. We can be thankful only for that.

**And then we come to the 1990s, the usual tensions are here, but now we have a lot of barrels on one place. Is that so? What actually happens in**

**June 1992 and how do the first hostilities develop and the first casualties occur in this area between the Croats and the Muslims?**

Well, I personally think often of this – on this day and the beginning of the conflict – and to this day it is not clear to me what was the spark that started this conflict. It is clear to me that we were living for hundreds of years one beside the other, that there are tensions between us, and disagreements, and fights, and it is a fact that we are two different worlds who live one beside the other, and it is a fact that in the town of Uskoplje in the last 50 years there were maybe five mixed marriages between the Croats and the Muslims. But what was the spark that caused the conflict on that day – that I don't know. Only, from my personal experience, I can say that I was totally surprised. That day when it happened I was at my home. It was the 20<sup>th</sup> of June. I was at home with friends, when someone came running and said: "There's all hell loose in the town, there's shooting!" I ask: "Who's shooting?" "The Muslims are shooting." "What is it, what is it all about?" "I have no idea, just go, get ready!" and I went, I got a secret assignment to go into the Headquarters which was in the "Jasa" factory to safeguard the Headquarters. And this conflict now was related to that. We came there, secured the Headquarters, there was some shooting in the town, rifle fire, but it didn't last long. Maybe it lasted a couple of hours. Again, I have to say: I don't know who started first, I really don't and I cannot accuse anybody directly. What I know is that at that time up there, on the Muslim part of the town maybe some 10, 15, 20 days earlier a Muslim unit appeared, these "Green Berets" which might have had the strength of one company...maybe two platoons, maybe some 40 – 50 people in all, and their Commander was Hanefija Prijić called Paraga, and he commanded these "Green Berets".

**These "Green Berets", were they the locals...**

At that time they were mostly local forces, and their Commander was Hanefija Prijić called Paraga, who is basically an uneducated type. I think he was a craftsman, I think he even plastered my father's house.

**How did they arm themselves?**

They armed themselves little by little. The Headquarters of the HVO and TO had a common fence, it means ours were in the factory, the "Jasa" textile factory and they were in the Factory of roller bearings which was just next to ours. It means, we have a common fence. You know, there is a common fence, and we would see when they were lining up in the morning and so on, but in the public, in the public they mostly kept their arms secret, because they had claimed at that time that they only have hunting rifles, that they don't have weapons and so on. But they worked on the procurement of weapons. They did. I even think that at that time, they mainly armed themselves through some channels via Croatia. And I also think that the HVO logisticians and Muslim logisticians from the TO, for instance a certain Fikret Musa, I think they went together to procure weapons, they tried to get weapons via Croatia. Of this I am certain 100%.

**Fikret Musa!?**

Fikret Musa, yes.

**And who was your logistician?**

Our logistician at that time was, I know this story because later both were accused of smuggling weapons. Actually, these people were procuring weapons legally for the HVO and for the TO, they even went together, used some common connections, and so on. From our side it was Marko Milić.

**Marko Milić?**

Marko Milić, yes. And they 100%...I know of one case when they went together, in coordination they went to Croatia and procured weapons. It means, Marko Milić was procuring for the HVO, and Fikret Musa was procuring for the TO, then in those times.

**It was done together?**

It was done together at that time.

**Where is Fikret Musa now?**

I don't know where Fikret Musa is, I don't think that he is in Vakuf. I think he even had problems later due to this procurement of weapons.

**It means he is not here somewhere?**

He is not here, but I think he was an intellectual type and he was, according to what I know, a pretty flexible guy, he was in favour of peaceful settlements and so. I think that in the first conflict he was the man who exerted a lot of influence for the tensions to calm down on the Muslim side. 100%.

**All right. It means, this is the event on 20<sup>th</sup> June. If I rightly understand, it is a conflict whose beginning is not quite clear to us now as we sit here, and this is a conflict that actually lasts only a short time. Is that so?**

Who started the conflict – I don't know. I know what happened. I know that Paraga and these men that he commanded put up checkpoints in the town, one

checkpoint was in the town near the Bililo neighbourhood and they simply stopped everyone: they were stopping the cars, arresting people and made them go into an emptied swimming pool. They closed them up, mistreated them, beat them up, fired the shotguns above their heads and so on. The other checkpoint was immediately across the Public Health Centre near Gradina. Here also the people were arrested and here it came to a shoot-out. The town, as I said was divided half-half, which means you have a street which is dividing the town, from the Croatian side there are men who stood beside those first houses with rifles, from the Muslim side stood the men with rifles, and they were shooting. Muslims were shooting towards our part of the town, Croats were shooting towards the Muslim part of the town, but as far as I know in these shoot-outs there were no fatalities. There was conflict also on a point which is on the exit from the town, up there towards Prozor, towards Mustafići: here also there was shooting and one member of the HVO was killed there, Zvonko Krajina. This conflict may have lasted...it was in the afternoon hours, maybe starting at 2 or 3 p.m. until some 5, 6 p.m., something like that. I cannot tell you for certain, maybe it was from noon until 3, 4 p.m., I only know it was in the afternoon hours. It may have lasted 2, 3 hours. As soon as darkness fell, apparently the then command of the TO and HVO made contact, probably they had a telephone contact and I think they very quickly organized a meeting to find out what is going on and, what I remember, very soon after that a vehicle of the Military Police, a joint one – it means a mixed crew of TO and HVO, a joint patrol, started going all over the town with the megaphone warning all members of the TO and the HVO that a ceasefire has been arranged, an agreement, and that all shooting must stop.

### **Who was in the car?**

I think these were the members of the Military Police of the TO and the HVO,

and they also used radio communication to order that there must be no shooting and the like.

**It means, this is the incident which happens and after that again, with a joint effort they try to bring the events into a...?**

This was the incident that happened – actually this is more than an incident because on our side there were two dead, and think that one boy was seriously wounded, he remained without a leg. This was due to 60 mm mortar grenades that were fired from the Muslim side. These were the losses on our side. On the Muslim side, I am not informed whether they had any casualties, I don't know. And in the evening the shooting stopped, and the morning came...

**This I want to know – the morning after.**

In the morning at dawn, I think we stayed for some time in the security, but when the people woke up it was as if nothing had happened. The vehicles started moving normally as always, all the prisoners were released from both sides. But it left traces on both sides – because, for instance the people that were imprisoned by the Muslims were abused, beaten and the like. It means, it was an incident, but an incident that left two people dead.

**It means there were dead?**

There were dead, correct. And the wounded.

**And the next day...**

The next day life continued to function in a normal way, not just that people were driving into each other's areas, but people walked, went from one part of

the town into another, not just individually, but collectively. As if nothing had happened. I had the feeling that it was not clear to the people what had happened. People thought: there was an incident and I think...it means there was an incident, a misunderstanding between the Croats and the Muslims, only this time it was not sorted out with fists, but there is war, people are armed, so they fired at each other. This is how the people explained the story to themselves.

**It means, if I get it correctly, it was perceived like all earlier, former...?**

This is how I saw it. We had one discotheque in town which was kept by Šandro Marko. There were a couple of cafes in town to which everyone was coming: both Croats and Muslims.

**And after this conflict?**

And after this conflict. And after this conflict the young from the Muslim side were coming to cafes in the Croatian part, and the Croats were going... Let's say, I went up there for a drink even after the second conflict, in the Muslim part of the town, maybe before Christmas 1992. But we will return to this later. It means, life continued normally as if nothing had happened, but those who were killed, their families, people that were beaten, on them it left traces. It deepened the mistrust between people. I remember by experience from this period – when it happened my grandmother who was speaking like No. 1 from Alan Ford: "My son, you will easily manage the Serbs, but how will you manage the Muslims!?" And I answered: "What war with the Muslims, there will be no war with the Muslims. How come you think like that, grandma?" This was probably an attitude of hers rooted deeply in the past, due to her experiences with the Turks, but I was convinced – and I was, believe me, at that time I was Deputy

Commander of the Scout Company and oftentimes I was at meetings in the Headquarters with Zrinko Tokić, with Pero Mejdandžić – and I can only confirm that all our efforts at that time were directed towards the Serbs. It means, all our efforts were how best to fortify the line up there at Kupres, and to resolve all the problems that were besetting an organization, the structuring of the army. You know how it is – there are problems, one shift leaves, the other shift comes, problems with fuel, problems with arms...All our problems were centred around the organization and fortification of the line towards the Serbs on Kupres. In that period.

**In that period, did you plan anything in relation to the Muslims?**

I was not Commander, but I was close to the Commander. I was on the briefings almost daily, at least once every three days – and there was no mention of anything like that. Not a mention!

**Even after this conflict of 20<sup>th</sup> June?**

Even after this conflict. This conflict 100% was not planned on the part of the HVO in Uskoplje. It means, on the part of the Commander Zrinko Tokić at that time and the Brigade "Dr. Ante Starčević" 100% it wasn't planned, because I would know if it had been.

**All right, it wasn't planned, but was it expected?**

Expected neither! I can say that it wasn't expected – everyone experienced it as a surprise and an incident situation. Because there were incident situations, the army is the army, armed, they drink in a coffee-shop, a bit too much and start shooting. But when Croats shoot between themselves, then the Croats resolve it among themselves. And here it came to the Croats vs. Muslims situation and then it

spread.

**So that was this conflict?**

I have to say, I don't know this as a fact, but I think that also from the Muslim side it was not planned, because it seems that among themselves at that moment when it happened there were enough cold, reasonable heads, and people in whose interest it had been to calm down the situation as soon as possible...

**And who tried that?**

100%. As I say, I was not at those meetings, but a meeting was arranged very quickly, people sat down and agreed on a ceasefire. But it is interesting that it happened on 20<sup>th</sup> June – and that was the first conflict that happened between the Croats and the Muslims. Chronologically, the first conflict that happened between the Croats and the Muslims in BIH happened in Uskoplje on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1992.

**What happens next? How do you live after this 20<sup>th</sup> June? It means, joint patrols of the Military Police go on, they...**

Yes, yes.

**...they jointly try to calm the situation, there are forces, apparently from one side and the other – working on the stabilization of the situation. But what happens afterwards?**

Afterwards I think certain...were established. After that period everything continues to function normally, and I think that after that period for the first time the Muslims go to the line, toward Kupres, up there from Raduški

Kamen toward Oglavak, that part...

**So it is a joint keeping of the lines?**

It is a joint keeping of the lines. The Military Police keeps its joint points and the town continues to live, breathe normally. On one hand the HVO continues to develop its structure, this is the beginning of the war, it is being structured, armed; on the other hand the Muslims likewise, they develop military structures, they arm themselves, and all our activities and all our effort in this period continues to be directed at... You must understand that these were the very beginnings; it was difficult to form an army from nothing, dig the line, make the people dig, make them behave in a military manner, equip them, arm them, everything was in short supply, in very, very short supply. This is the period July, August, September 1992. I remember that in August 1992 there was the shelling of Gornji Vakuf Uskoplje on the part of the Serbs from the Serbian positions up there on Kupres. I don't know if there were any casualties, maybe there was one civilian injured, or none. You can find these data in the Uskoplje News (*Uskopaljski vjesnik*) I remember one front page, a dead cow and the title: "They Shoot Cows, Don't They". That was August 1992. Although it was pretty far, Voljice and Gornji Vakuf Uskolje were also shelled. As far as we are concerned, it means July, August, in August there was another interesting event when the Serbs on the Bugojno area started an offensive toward Bugojno. I personally know that they engaged some special units of theirs, some "Red Berets" from Drvar. In the period of the Assumption, it means between 12<sup>th</sup> August until 20<sup>th</sup> August, some seven or ten days these attacks were going on, on the area where we scouted and formed the line in May 1992, it means on that area. This is north of the Bugojno – Kupres road, there on Mala Šuljaga and Velika Šuljaga and here to the south on the area of Garački Podovi, and as far as I know the HVO and TO

were on joint lines, and the part that concerns us here – Uskoplje, Gornji Vakuf, the Serbs penetrated to a position called Skrte and I don't know the name of the other position. In any case, they had penetrated there, and we took over that part to relieve the people from Bugojno, because we had a relatively short line to keep, then we jointly took it over. The Muslims took one part on Oglavak, and we took the other part including Skrte, Ivica and Planinica and I know that the Serbs in that period penetrated to Skrte and Jazenik...

**Skrte, Jazenik!?**

Skrte and Jazenik, yes. This part here, they had penetrated, made a diversion, I think there were some killed on our side and then, I remember in that period we had non-stop alerts and the like, we went up there to help. This was August, the end of August. At that time the Muslims kept the joint, they kept the lines here, but I think we went up there to help with Skrte and Jazenik.

**Were there any problems about the joint keeping of lines...?**

Well, there were, there were. There were problems – this is what caused discontent in me and others – there were problems with their keeping of the line.

**What were these problems?**

These were problems of the type...they were always complaining that they don't have enough means, that they don't have enough fuel, that they are not sufficiently armed, that they have problems.

**Militarily speaking, did you have a feeling of security, were you sure about that part of the line which the Muslims controlled?**

At that period not really. We didn't. I cannot say, there were individuals on their side, people who took it seriously and wanted it to succeed. My neighbour who is a Muslim was within our Home Defence (*Domobrani*) Company of the HVO and went to the line together with my brother. They were in the trenches together. So, I can't say, there were individual cases, but generally speaking there were problems with them. Now, if I were to show you what a small part of the line they kept, you wouldn't believe me. But this is as it was. And we constantly had these problems.

**Just one thing; you mentioned that in August 1992 the Serbs are shelling. What are they shelling?**

They are shelling Gornji Vakuf.

**Gornji Vakuf!?**

Yes.

**So, the Serbs are shelling Gornji Vakuf!?**

That's right. From Kupres.

**And how is the event interpreted later?**

Well, listen, at that moment I didn't know how to interpret that. But later we heard from a prisoner, it might have been November or December 1993 when we captured a Muslim from Gornji Vakuf...actually we didn't capture him, but he was making brandy out of wild apples, got drunk and wandered off to our checkpoint. His name is Ibro Broketa, I think this guy is now somewhere in America, he left Bosnia and all of us, and sent us all a letter saying: "Fuck

you!" He told us a story that when the grenades were falling in August 1992 on Gornji Vakuf Uskoplje – it is interesting that the greatest part of the grenades were falling on the Muslim part of the town – among them, they were told that we are shelling them from our positions above Galčica. That we have a cannon above Galčica. Actually, Galčica is in the direction of Kupres, looking from Gornji Vakuf you look over the Galčica and further on there is Kupres – and the sound is coming from that direction. They were telling them that the HVO is shelling the Muslim part of the town above Galčica with a cannon.

**Who was saying that? Did you manage to find that out?**

I didn't manage to find out the source of the story, but it circulated among them.

**And were the Croats shelling them?**

No way! There wasn't the slightest intention!

**Did such a possibility exist at all?**

At that time we didn't even have the possibility. As far as the Brigade "Dr. Ante Starčević" is concerned, I think in heavy artillery we had 120 mm mortars, I don't think we ever had a 122 mm cannon or a howitzer. Never! Never! Even later on we didn't have such things. The biggest that we had is the 120 mm mortar. And the grenades that were falling on the town were cannon grenades, I think they were 122 or 152 mm, I am not sure. Maybe some were tank grenades. At that time we didn't have, no way. This is August 1992 when we went up there, defended ourselves from the Serbs, got killed and the like.

**This is August 1992. What happens next?**

At that time already there were some stories – these are not stories, but truth – just above the town, above this Muslim part of the town there is a part, some three hills called Relej, Krč, Malo Seoce. I remember this period, it might have been July, August, maybe even September 1992. Information has reached us: let's say, one of our men who was a shepherd guarding sheep, on that part, on those hills he saw the Muslims digging something. And then he asked them what they were digging, and they answered: "We're digging" "What are you digging?", and they said something like, they were digging for the defence of the town. They were saying something like, what if the Serbs break through from Kupres – they are going to defend us here. At that time, as far as I personally was concerned, and as far everyone in the Headquarters was concerned, people didn't take this information seriously. We had other, more pressing needs, as I said. Today when you have an orderly army everything looks simple. But at that time, nothing was ordered as it should have been, the structuring and arming was in the process, the Commander had 100 problems to assure a shift and to send the men to the line. He couldn't even sleep. He could hardly manage. How is he going to arm the army, there were still men who were on the list and didn't have personal weapons, not to mention some other issues. But it is a fact that they began digging in their positions above the town maybe as early as July, but in August, September 1992 for certain, they were digging in the positions above the town on Relej, Krč and Malo Seoce. What was the reason for that...

**We are speaking...just to clarify a bit: we are speaking about the digging in which the Muslim forces are doing, is that so?**

That is so.

**This digging of the trenches, was it done openly?**

It wasn't done openly. Mainly they did it at night, and mainly they dug in positions from the other side of the hill that were not easily visible. And these positions were masked.

**It means, the positions were masked, and, if I rightly remember, you saw these positions well only in January 1993, is that so?**

That is so.

**And what did you realize then, in January? Towards whom were these positions turned, i.e. how much were they actually functional for a potential battle against the Serbs?**

They made no sense, the town cannot be defended from there. These were no positions towards the Serbs, but positions towards the Croats. It was their story. It was, I don't know now, I wasn't officially at the meeting where someone from our side could have asked why they were doing that, why is that so, but these are the stories that I heard, that they are digging in for the case if the Serbs penetrate, that these are the last defences, the last lines of defence of the town. But, evidently by their position, arrangement these positions were turned towards the Croats.

**And how were these positions made, these trenches? Was it something improvised?**

In January 1993 when we took these positions on Relej, Krč and Malo Seoce, I was after that on Relej and Krč – these were the positions that were very, very well dug in. These were the positions for standing upright, it means they were covered by logs, masked and I remember that on Relej there was one central

dugout, and likewise on Krč, one central, large dugout. It means the dugout on Krč was a dugout which could accommodate between 15 and 20 men. And all of these were the positions which – in order to dig them out on such a ground, a rocky, a truly rocky ground, you needed to work for several months with several dozen people. It means, intensive digging, intensive work was necessary to dig in these positions. Personally, I was surprised, totally surprised when I saw this, I couldn't believe, I couldn't believe that such a thing could exist there.

### **In January 1993?**

Absolutely, absolutely. I was totally surprised, totally surprised by these positions how they looked, and these trenches, and these dugouts that were there. I just couldn't believe. Even later, even later, I had been everywhere, maybe once on Demirovac in 1995 I saw better dug in positions. I saw very few of them like that.

### **Who was with you then, in January 1993? Who else saw these positions and what were the reactions of the people who saw them together with you?**

Well, I cannot remember which people from my unit were there, who saw that. But they were all commenting: "Look at this!"

### **So they were all taken aback, surprised?**

Yes they were. They didn't expect it. I personally didn't, and many others didn't expect it either. Until January 1993 when the hostilities broke out, this major conflict, I know, I can testify 100% that HVO forces did not have a plan of defence of the city from the Muslims. They didn't know where the position will be, they didn't have a single dug in

position. I was on a line in the town – and they didn't have a single bunker, no protection whatsoever. 100%! It means, on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1993, as far as I remember, when this conflict started we didn't have a single dug in position. I can testify to this, 100%. Precisely for this reason in the first days our men were killed like rabbits. For that reason. The snipers were not working. We had nothing, we were naked like rabbits. I think there was no plan. After September 1992 there comes October 1992 and I cannot say much about it, I wasn't in that conflict, but at that time also a conflict occurred, somewhere around 25<sup>th</sup> October, a conflict which, in my view, was a reflection of the conflict in Prozor Rama, and then from Prozor Rama it spilled over to us – and in parallel there were some checkpoints in central Bosnia because Jajce was falling, the situation was very bad around Jajce. I remember that help had to go all the way to Jajce, but they couldn't pass because of some checkpoints.

**Who was sending help, who was supposed to send help, who went to help?**

I don't know much about it. I know that some of our members from the HVO went to Jajce, from central Bosnia a lot of members of the HVO went to Jajce also. I also know that the Muslims had their own positions in Jajce, what was the proportion – that I don't know, but as far as we from Uskoplje are concerned we were more concentrated on Uskoplje, Bugojno and a smaller part went to Jajce. As regards the Muslims and TO, I don't think any one of them went to Jajce, I think they had in the summer of 1992 an attempt at unblocking of Sarajevo, without success. I think they went to the unblocking of Sarajevo, and the forces were mainly concentrated here. And then, October...

**How long does this conflict last?**

It lasted longer than the one on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1992 and it was more intense. More intense in the sense that there was more shooting, it means a conflict of

greater intensity. With respect to casualties, I think there were no casualties, likewise on our part there were no casualties.

**All right, but apparently again it is one brief conflict. 25<sup>th</sup> October – and how long does it last?**

It lasts about two days. I wasn't here so I cannot speak much about it, but it also lasted two days and again it was something similar. I think, it broke out in Prozor, and as the shooting started in Prozor, it started again with the checkpoints, with taking prisoners, and the shooting – and I think at that time, so the story goes, the Muslims went up to Rajce, and I think that our men went up there too. Ivica was up there with his team and they drove them away from there, but our men also didn't remain up there but returned. I have an example which I can tell from my own place: my village is called Novi Paloč, above it is a plateau called Podovi, on the other side is the village Voljice where there are quite a number of Muslims and then in that October the armed Muslims went out to that hill, and upon seeing it a Commander of our company who knows these people, and he went up there alone – it seems funny as I recall it now – but he went up there and said: "What are you doing, why did you come here, get down!", I think literally like that. Now, imagine 30 armed men and then a guy comes...

**We must clarify something for those who will one day listen to this recording. This man who came out in front of these 30 armed Muslims and said: "C'mon, what are you doing here..."**

Yes.

**...he was either brave to the point of craziness, or he had no idea what was actually going on, or?**

I don't know what he thought, I can presume he thought that the situation was really tense, he saw that something might happen – but he wasn't clear on why this is happening, who needs this and he came out: "What are you doing up here, people, what do you want?". "Well, we didn't think, we heard...!" As I say, again this disinformation, maybe they expected that our troops were going to attack them, maybe our people were safe then, the Company was up there on Podovi, but it didn't evolve into a conflict, it didn't come to a shoot-out for the simple reason that this Čiča knew some men there, from the other side and came and said: "People go home, there's no reason to be here!" – and they returned. And at that time, the conflict didn't happen. Not at that time. They returned home.

**What was life like after the 25<sup>th</sup> October, i.e. after this conflict? We saw that in June life went back to normal, people started going from one part of the town into another. What is the situation like after 25<sup>th</sup> October?**

Again the same. Again the same is happening, just like after the 20<sup>th</sup> June. Again, it seems funny to me today, this is incomparable to the conflict we had against the Serbs on various fronts – but again, nothing ... You know what the people were thinking after the second conflict? "An incident, a shoot-out, there will be no more, let it pass", and I say, the people again started to communicate in a normal way, again they met in the cafes – the cafe is a measurement of something, you know? People can walk down the street on the other side, they can go into a shop or take a walk – but when they come into a cafe, sit down, have a drink, communicate, it means the situation is evidently normal. This is what I saw and this is how it was – with the only difference that in December, shortly before Christmas, or at that time, the incidents became more and more frequent. For instance, just before Christmas or at that time, someone placed an explosive device near the Hotel; on some places the Croatian flag was fluttering, one of the Muslims climbs up to take it down, so there were incidents like these, but no

shooting, no casualties. It was an interesting kind of a situation, I remember, although I was not in the town a lot, but in November 1992 I held personally, and we as a unit, we are on Mačkovac, this is up there on Pidriš, we had a training camp where we mainly trained our new members who were coming into our unit. It was not only because of them, but also because of us, to keep ourselves in shape. We had continuous education: simply, a professional army must have a continuous education, because as they say: sweat saves blood. We stuck to that and in November 1992 we had training up there. I remember we had some trial shooting from a recoilless cannon, and we had a model of a tank, and I remember that the colonel Željko Šiljeg would come to see us, to see what we were doing, Zrinko Tokić took him and said: "I have one unit here doing the training" and just on that day we had a demonstration shooting from the recoilless cannon and we were targeting a model of a tank and it was successful, we hit the "tank", I remember that well. But somehow, parallel to that I think that we planned the action from the direction of Bugojno toward Kupres, and we went then from Mačkovac, we sent a team. I wasn't there myself, but we sent a team, it was the beginning of December 1992, and because of this action of ours, another action was undertaken up there from Mala Šuljaga. I think that some positions from our side were moved a bit, but without significant changes against the Serbs, and at that time due to this action the members of our regiment "Ante Bruno Bušić" were situated on Pavić Polje – and from there they went, here was their base, from there they went toward Kupres. In December, at the beginning of December 1992 subsequent operations of the HVO against the Serbs were undertaken. Somehow at that time, before Christmas and around Christmas it was felt that there are foreigners in the town. I mean, on the Muslim side, some men, some new faces, and I remember that just before Christmas, maybe 2 – 3 days before Christmas I went for a drink in a Muslim part of the town, in the cafe "Kod Džofa", which was a well frequented town place...

### **It was in December?**

In December 1992. It means, before Christmas 1992 I was up there having a drink. I was there often in that café, because I liked it and it was frequented by Croats and Muslims alike. It means in November, December 1992, but already we are in December 1992, a tension was growing due to these removals of the flags, some explosive device, and I remember one story: there was some quarrel, the place is closing down, and someone was shoving us out: "Get out!" One guy didn't want, everybody was a bit drunk, and I remember as we got out, one of the Muslims, Nuno, they call him Nuno, I don't know his real name, he said: "You will see!" I remember that well. "You will see! We were not ready for the Serbs, but we are ready for you!"

### **What did he say?**

He said: "We were not ready for the Serbs, but for you we prepared ourselves well!" This cut into my ears, and I saw that it wasn't completely safe to go up there, that the situation is not brilliant, that it is tense, and after that I didn't go to that place any more. Then happened Christmas, the New Year, but somehow at that time, there was a concentration, a concentration of troops...

**What does it actually mean? What does it mean when you say that there was an increased number of people? An increased number of people – where, which people, how was it felt?**

Well, you know, when you live all your life in one town and when you know every face, you know every man personally. Literally, even if you don't know his name and surname, you know his face. I personally started to spot in the Muslim part of the town and I saw a number of new faces. Simply, I didn't

know who and what they were.

**Were they in civilian clothes, or...?**

Well, some were in uniforms, some were in civilian clothes, both. At that time, you know how it was, a large number of them did not have complete uniforms, but it was a mixed bag: jeans and a camouflage jacket on top, or the other way around, but, yes, some of them had uniforms.

**You noticed that in December 1992?**

This was around Christmas 1992. It means, Christmas, New Year, maybe even after the New Year, in that period: It means the New Year and after the New Year 1992/93.

**And you are going to this Muslim part of the town until the end of December 1992?**

Yes.

**And have your drink as usual?**

That is so.

**So, let's repeat: after this warning, you also begin to look at the situation with different eyes?**

Yes, of course. I begin, I realized, although... as a unit, we had a Commander and a warning – irrespective of the Muslim part of the town, but generally – we were forbidden to be in the bars and cafes at night, to drink, and that was self-

understood. We were specially warned by our Commander, when the situation had become tense, that we shouldn't go into the Muslim part of the town, get drunk and things like that.

**Just a moment. There was an order that...**

Not an order. The Commander simply told us that we must not go in uniform – and he forbade us also in the Croatian part of the town to be outside after 11, 12 p.m., to get drunk, especially around Christmas, the New Year. The situation was tense, he strictly forbade us to go into the Muslim part of the town in uniform, with arms and to get drunk up there.

**I need to clarify one more point. So, it is an instruction – not an order, but some kind of prescription – that you must not cross into the Muslim part of the town with arms and in uniform. How about in civilian clothes? Are you allowed to do that?**

Well, in civilian clothes we can, people continue to go, but we had such an instruction. When the situation was already tense, then he said: "You never know, checkpoints can spring up again as they did twice, someone will arrest you! What do you need that for?" The man said: "Someone will arrest you, you will get a couple of slaps on the face, you don't even need that!" He took care of his people, and that's it. He warned the people not to get into conflict situations.

**This instruction not to go into the Muslim part of the town with arms and in uniform – at that time can it be taken as an attempt not to create additional tension?**

Absolutely! Absolutely! Actually, even before that in 1992 we never went armed and in uniform into the Muslim part of the town. If we went there for a

drink, maybe we were in uniform, but rarely. Mostly you went for a drink in civilian clothes. There's no point in going for a drink in uniform. There were sporadic cases, but we personally stuck to the rule.

**All right! So, that is the end of December 1992, is that so?**

That is so.

**What happens next?**

Then came the New Year 1993.

**Happy New Year 1993?**

Beautiful New Year, Happy New Year which we had been waiting for – but as soon as the New Year was over...they had begun: the explosion occurred near the Hotel and the situation was on the verge of incident – the removal of the flag, explosion, I cannot remember all the things that happened, but the situation was tense, you could feel in the air that it was tense. And I remember, then, for the first time, for the first time we got an order that if hostilities break out, not when, but if, if hostilities break out to establish a defence. For instance, my unit got the assignment to establish defence in the town itself, where we were supposed to take positions from Tarlina, that's what we call it - Tarilina's house, the Police, at Brančilo, the discotheque, Post Office, and down here toward the Bus Station. It means, this part. And what happened, happened. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> January it happened: non-stop some alarms, non-stop some tension, and as soon as darkness fell there were less people, less movement, it is not allowed and things like that. And then, on 11<sup>th</sup> there was shooting again. Who? What? How? Again I don't have the answers, but likewise I can confirm that even then, on 11<sup>th</sup> January we didn't

have even one trench dug out, not one bunker. It means, we were ready to go to those lines in case of conflict, to be prepared to defend – but there were no orders, no orders...

**Were there any preparations for this conflict, except this "if"?**

None! There were no other preparations! There were no preparations in the sense that we would secretly dig out some bunkers, some sniper nests. It means, there was nothing of that. It means, there was nothing.

**All right. Were there any preparations, any reconnaissance – you should know it, is that so?**

100% sure, I should know if there had been any reconnaissance activities. All reconnaissance on this area was done by us. It means, there were no reconnaissance activities, because we would be involved in that 100%.

**And you weren't.**

We weren't. We were here in the town, in our base and ready in case of shooting only to go out to the edge of our part of the town, and to be there as a defence. And this is what happened. 11<sup>th</sup> January was, you know, when you find yourself in a situation: when darkness falls, there is no one on the street, and already guards began patrolling. At night there is no shooting, but there are guards, because as soon as darkness falls the situation becomes tense. And then when darkness falls, someone gets drunk and starts shooting into the air.

**It means, there is sporadic shooting?**

From one side and from the other. I maintain that we who were here and got

the order to do guard duty at night – none of us had the order to shoot, to attack first. 100%! And no one of us fired, but over there someone got drunk and started shooting. I repeat, from their side. Although it is symptomatic that in this conflict, in this first conflict in January 1993 there were forces amassed on one side and the other. When the conflict started, it means the shooting is already on, and shooting goes on – I remember it very well, there is shooting, the snipers are very active, that's what I know about that time: with us in the town, on these positions around the town at that moment there were no troops from elsewhere, we were all just the locals. On the Muslim part of the town, on their part they had one rifle platoon: now whether they were 30 or more, I don't know but even five are enough to cause havoc – and then, when the conflict started, they were taking us down with the snipers like rabbits. Literally, like clay pigeons! We had seven, eight killed in the first couple of days – all from sniper fire! But in a situation like that, when shooting started, when lives were being wasted, all the time Zrinko Totić, by means of radio communication, non-stop he was urging us to stop shooting, that we ought not to shoot, that he will punish everyone who will shoot.

**Just a moment, they are firing at you...**

I am not saying that none of us were shooting. Personally, I didn't...

**All right, this is clear to me, but you are saying: they are shooting at you, and you have an order banning you from shooting back...**

An order! Listen, all this time, it lasts the whole day, there is shooting, apparently the situation is out of control and there is sporadic shooting, but regardless of this sporadic shooting, Zrinko Totić orders over the radio that we must stop shooting. We had a situation, I remember it well, he repeated it 100 times, he became boring, it irritated the people...I later apologized to the

man... There was a situation when Josip Brnada was injured, he was injured in the abdomen and we were pulling him out, but while we were pulling him out, a sniper was shooting from the Hotel and we, in order to pull the boy out, we had to shoot there on the Hotel in order to pull him out. And he is speaking all the time on the Motorola: "You mustn't shoot!" I am telling him: "Snipers are shooting at us, we have a man injured" And he again, persistently: "Regardless of everything, I order you to stop shooting!" I just want to illustrate, this is how it was. We later pulled this boy out, but he succumbed, he was dead – and it came to the point that they were swearing at Tokić. I told him: "Go fuck yourself, you mother fucker, you and your orders! These are shooting at us, and we cannot...!" It went a bit out of control, but it calmed down after a day or two – not that the shooting stopped, there is sporadic shooting, but again a meeting was set up. I remember, there was an UNPROFOR base in Uskoplje – the British were there, and then I don't know through which channels, something even went via Bugojno, the Bugojno Headquarters, they organized a meeting of the opposing Headquarters in the UNPROFOR base in order to establish a ceasefire. I was present at that meeting, there were also Ivica Budimir, Zrinko Tokić, colonel Željko Šiljeg, I don't know who else was there from our side, but I remember that we were on that meeting. A personnel carrier of UNPROFOR came to take us, it parked in front of the church, we sat inside and they drove us there into the base. In the base, from the Muslim side, there was Goran Čišić, who was Commander of their scouts, there was Agić, there was their leadership. This officer, an Englishman, made us again sit at the table to agree on the ceasefire. I remember when Željko Šiljeg was saying: "People, what has come into you?" and as if jokingly he tried to speak in the sense: "Will you stop shooting, free those roads, I have a girlfriend in central Bosnia, and now I cannot go to see her!" I remember this instance, but I also remember that...

### **So Šiljeg said that, in that base?**

Yes, 100%. And here we tried to agree on a ceasefire, in the sense of stopping the shooting. But it seems that it was out of control already: when we returned from that base, maybe an hour or two it calmed down a bit, and then the conflict flared up again, with a greater intensity than before.

### **What was the atmosphere like on that meeting?**

Accusations were predominant. It was like when two guys have a fight and then they say: "You hit me!", "No, you hit me!" and so on, who fired first. "You are shooting, you this, you that...!" "You stop, then we stop!" – and we left that meeting with an agreement that we will try to resolve this issue, but apparently it was not resolved. It couldn't have been resolved. I remember what Goran Čišić who was Commander of their scout unit said at that time, that he had information that tanks are moving from the direction of Pidriš toward the Muslim part of the town. This might have been on the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> January 1993, and I remember, they had communications, and Šiljeg called Pidriš and asked if anyone had moved the tanks and those on Pidriš said no. Then he said, still speaking to Pidriš: "I don't know if someone has or hasn't, but don't let anyone...!" It means, he telephoned in front of them. On that meeting it was agreed again in principle that we will try to calm down the situation, to stop the shooting and the like – but it was just then that the conflict flared up, after that in the town – we were totally unprepared in the sense that neither I personally, nor the soldiers and especially civilians didn't expect such a violent conflict. My present wife lived in a building which stands exactly on the separation line, she is in the Croatian part of the town, and this building is at the corner, it is at the corner, and these two streets were the Muslim part of the town. When shooting started, they simply remained in that building, all the civilians remained in that building and in these first line houses. Why? Because, in the first clashes which

happened there was sporadic shooting, and it was over, as if nothing has been. When this third conflict occurred, people were not expecting it, they didn't expect such a major conflict, they didn't expect that anything of that nature could happen – they simply stayed there and she, we were not even in a relationship then, she and her family stayed there in the apartment just like all the tenants in that building. These first houses, from one side and the other, people were there and they stayed inside, there was shooting, really violent shooting, and people stayed inside.

**One technical question, this is a building, not a family house?**

This is a building, yes.

**Did this building have any kind of basement as a shelter?**

No, it didn't have a basement. Actually, it was business premises.

**It means, it didn't have any space where people could take shelter?**

No. The first day in the evening, as soon as darkness fell, we went there as a team and pulled the civilians from this first row of houses.

**There was shooting at that time?**

Yes, there was shooting. In the evening it was dark, so under the cover of darkness we pulled these civilians from the first row of houses and put them in the basements of the second or third row of houses. But again, even this was close, some 50 metres from the first line.

**These basements in the second, third row of houses, had they been prepared to receive people?**

No, they weren't.

**Were the windows closed?**

No.

**...with sand bags?**

No.

**Was anything at all prepared for the accommodation of civilians?**

Nothing was prepared.

**So, in January 1993, the civilians – if I understand correctly – were completely taken by surprise when the conflict broke out and...**

Absolutely!

**...and they had no prepared shelters in case of attack?**

Absolutely. No one! We were at a position at Brančilo, and the first few days there were civilians down with us in the basement. There were some old ladies, women, they were there some 7, 8, 10 days and then, when it became obvious that the conflict will not last 7, 8 days but will last longer – then we moved these civilians somewhere further, in the depth. It means, nothing was prepared, these basements were not prepared for anything. I should also add that in that basement where my girlfriend was

and her late mother, women organized themselves at their own initiative and cooked food for us so we had something to eat. And this food was brought to us at night, no one could go out during the day because of the snipers. There was no prepared food, organized...

**It is very indicative that nothing at all had been prepared...**

Nothing at all!

**... neither the basement, nor the accommodation.**

Nothing was prepared, nothing at all!

**So how long does it last, this conflict in January 1993?**

It starts around 11<sup>th</sup> January and lasts until the end of February. Until the end of February, beginning of March and in this conflict our forces took militarily two or three Muslim villages. Actually, I think that the taking of those villages was more a result of the fact that we were cut off traffic-wise. We were cut off and it was militarily obvious, we had to take these villages. The first attack, the first serious attack was undertaken by Muslim forces on Pavić Polje. Pavić Polje is a pretty large Croatian village, with some 1500 inhabitants, 1000 to 1500 inhabitants, but it is encircled from all sides by Muslim villages: from the above Grnica, Bojska, Dražev Dolac, Duratbegović Dolac and Hrasnica. It means, it is encircled by Muslim villages from all sides and there is no, over this Hrasnica it was cut off traffic-wise from the other Croatian parts of the municipality. So the Muslims attacked that village and tried to take it militarily immediately at the beginning of the conflict, and the village was literally just before the fall, they almost took it – and then one of our armoured personnel carriers went to help them. This was more of a psychological support. It

means, at the height of combat our soldiers broke through by that main road, flew through although they had been hit by an RPG, and came down there to help in Pavić Polje – and Pavić Polje was saved. After that, with regard to the fact that they were in encirclement: it means no injured or a civilian could get out – our forces launched an operation and militarily took Hrasnica. What I know, related to this conflict, I wasn't down there personally, but I know that Hrasnica was militarily taken and that a number of soldiers, civilians were taken, and they were all exchanged later. And I know that at that moment, with regard to houses, at the beginning of that conflict, no houses were set aflame, nor was any property damaged. Maybe there was some theft, you always have that, but not the burning of houses, at the beginning. There might have been individual cases, but not in an intensive way. 100%.

### **How many people were taken prisoner in Pavić Polje?**

Well, I think it was surely more than 50, I don't remember the exact number, but certainly more than 50, 60 militarily capable prisoners in Hrasnica and they were placed, I am not sure, I think they were placed somewhere on Trnovača, down in the factory as prisoners. The other location which our troops took militarily was it means if you look at the municipality, this is the municipality, this is the connection to Prozor Rama, with the Croatian part, Pavić Polje was here somewhere and the traffic to it was cut off somewhere by Hrasnica – and Uzričje and Duša are here and this is the link here over Uzričje and Duša toward Pidriš and toward Croatia. It means, we were cut off, this part, the greatest part, the town was cut off, Trnovača, Pilić Polje was completely cut off by this Uzričje. And this Uzričje was also militarily taken, actually, it was not militarily taken, but after the taking of Relej, Krč and Seoce – they literally remained in encirclement and during the night they pulled out from Uzričje through the woods, down into the Muslim part of the town. Some of the soldiers, here, from Duša, have been captured and I think there were some, I don't remember exactly,

wounded civilians on the Muslim side. I think there were some wounded civilians and they were let through, they were given first aid, the others were taken prisoner, and as far as I know also all the soldiers that were taken prisoner were later exchanged.

**If I rightly follow, everything that happened here was according to the rules?**

Well, it is interesting, I always keep repeating that, the conflict in Uskoplje was very violent. It was violent with a lot of victims – but there were no major infringements of the Geneva Conventions, the rules of war and of the law. Maybe there were some individual cases of which I don't know exactly, I didn't see them, but generally not. This is supported by the fact that one Zrinko Totić – who was the war Commander of the Brigade "Ante Starčević" now, after the war, was the mayor of the joint municipality of Croats and Muslims. And simply, there is no one who can look him in the eye and say: "You did this or that!". There were no such things.

**Basically, the prisoners were exchanged after that?**

100 %! I think they were situated down there, I was never down there, I didn't see, but I think they were situated down in the furniture factory in Trnovača. There were several hundred, over 100. Between 100 and 200 militarily capable prisoners and all were exchanged. On the other hand, our people were imprisoned by the Muslims, likewise, prisoners were taken in Batuša.

**Croats were taken prisoner too?**

Likewise. At the end of February, when this conflict was over there was an

exchange on the basis – all for all. And somewhere by the end of February, when this ceasefire was agreed, a deal was made that all the positions and all the trenches be filled in. All the positions, the trenches, and that all the units that came from elsewhere, that they withdraw escorted by UNPROFOR. So these Muslim units that were here were taken, escorted by UNPROFOR, over Bistička Rika to Novi Travnik, central Bosnia – and I think that there were also our units who also went escorted by UNPROFOR – up toward Pidriš. I wish to mention this: after these locations were militarily taken, it came to light that really in all these locations they were very, very well dug in.

**You determined that later on?**

We determined that later on. When Duša was militarily taken and when we entered into Uzričje we realized that they had been very well dug in, fortified, something terrific. This is a fact. Now someone may say that they were afraid of us...

**You saw that personally?**

I saw it personally! For instance, in Uzričje I saw trenches and dugouts so well dug in that it was a miracle!

**With your military experience and knowledge, taking into account the configuration of the terrain and other factors – how much time do you think it was necessary for the digging of such positions and their preparation?**

In Uzričje it was not so hard to dig as on Relejš and Krč, but even here a couple of months were necessary for what they did.

**A couple of months?**

Yes.

**And also, everything was well done, well fortified?**

Yes.

**Did that surprise you?**

It absolutely did. I was totally surprised. Our position at the beginning of hostilities was different – for instance I was in the town at Brančilo, you have nothing. You simply have nothing. And as the shooting went on during the night – fill the bags, make the bunkers and so, we started fortifying ourselves, simply a bomb falls from above, a cassette bomb and you have nothing above your head. You have no bunker. It means, during the conflict, during the conflict itself we started to dig the trenches and to fortify our positions, all the time under fire. And I was...

**These Muslim trenches, were they built during the conflict?**

Not at all, they were built much earlier. When the ceasefire had been signed I went with a commission which went to oversee the filling in of the trenches, and the difference was enormous, drastic. Our trenches had a depth up to the knees – something we could do quickly, in this one month of fighting. And on their side, there were, the bunkers were dug in, it was pure poetry.

**Poetry? Who was in that commission?**

Mainly in the commission were the forces...

**Was it a mixed commission?**

There were mixed commissions and they were under the supervision of UNPROFOR, it means, together, depending on which ground you are. If, for instance, we went up there to Ždrimce – that the Commander of the Company of Ždrimac HVO was present, the Commander from the other side, and in the presence of UNPROFOR they went, an order was given to fill in all the trenches and bunkers and then the commission went who verified it.

**Is there any documentation about it? Were the commissions keeping records?**

I believe they did and there must be a written trace somewhere.

**It means, the evidence of the work of these commissions, i.e. on the state which they found.**

I believe it must exist, because surely, 100% the records were kept, because there were some problems: they hide a trench, there is no trench there, and so, in order not to fill it in. Or there were cases that the trench is filled in just a little, superficially, but the commissions tried to be as serious as they could that it really...

**So, were the commissions trying to determine, put on record, whether a certain trench is shallow, short, and the other is...**

That I do not know.

**How much did these records go into details?**

I don't know.

**Did they mention whose trench it was or were all trenches...?**

I can only speak from my own experience. I was up there on the Partizansko Groblje because I was here in the town, and I was going with a commission who came to the site to determine that these trenches are filled in, and they were really filled in, I wasn't a member of anything, I went there because I had been in the town on the line, I went to the location to show that this is it, to lead the men so that they do not enter a mine field. Personally I kept no records. The UNPFOFOR people were putting everything down on paper, 100%, this I am sure, and whether anyone on the part of the HVO, ABIH was keeping the records too, I think they did, likewise. Because the reports were submitted about what has been done, how it was done, and how far this work had progressed.

**It means there should be a written trace somewhere, is that so?**

Absolutely. Although, for instance, again and after this conflict – the conflict was over, the ceasefire was signed, we arranged with the Muslims a football match, and here on the dividing line a football match was played. These are the funny sides of war – but when the ceasefire has been signed, there is no more shooting, and with regard to the fact that the people know each other... I was simply up there on the position, up on the other side, 30 metres from me was a guy who went to school with me. Simply, in the evening there is a bit of shooting, then we talk a bit and when it calmed down then we start again with: "Hey, how are you doing?" "Let's play a football match!" "I won't, you will kill me!" "I won't 100%. You don't shoot, I don't shoot!" There was a beer warehouse, very close to the line, neither they nor we could get to it, and then we said all right, we make an agreement, I will take you, there is a fountain there, this was the dividing line of this part of the town, and then they came – you won't shoot, we won't shoot, and then we met, played football a bit,

and back everyone to his side.

### **And this passed so peacefully?**

There, it passed peacefully, the ceasefire was agreed, streets were cleaned up, the trenches were filled in, and life began anew, more normal than before these conflicts. Not just a little, but again the people were going, communicated with one part of the town and the other, the cars were going, and further on after that conflict – only now with much more caution also during the day, and no one went during the night. Although all the time there were some guards, there was no shooting, but at night there were occasionally some guards, maybe also in the villages, maybe somewhere yes, maybe somewhere not, but after the beginning of March 1993 the ceasefire is on again and it lasted until 24<sup>th</sup> June 1993, i.e. until St. John's Day. I only want to tell you this, and you will see it when we go up to Uskoplje and when I show you where Relej, Krč and Malo Seoce are – you will see how essential these elevations are for the defence of the town. Militarily, we took those elevations and we kept the town in encirclement in January 1993. There were even some hints, on the Muslim side there was one team which wanted to surrender, but it didn't happen – but I want to say that we took militarily those elevations and stayed on them. We could have entered, in my assessment, we could have entered the town. It was stopped, why it was stopped, why the conflict was stopped – I don't know. Maybe it is good, maybe not. It doesn't matter now. But in any case in that conflict which lasted from January until the beginning of March we kept all the dominant elevations above the town. Among other, these positions that they had fortified so well: Relej, Krč and Seoce. These trenches were filled in superficially, just a little. During the ceasefire, we withdrew from these positions.

### **That was between March and June?**

That's right. We withdrew from these positions in accordance with the agreement with UNPROFOR, but in May, June the Muslims again, secretly, during the night started going up there – because it is close to them, immediately above their houses – to clean up these trenches little by little. We had taken these positions militarily and withdrew from them in accordance with the agreement with UNPROFOR! And then, when shooting started again on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1993, the Muslims – Paraga, Hanefija Prijić, they militarily attacked our village in Voljice, one part is called Jagnjid and here towards Kute. However, they overestimated their power and they were militarily repelled, the military attack was repelled, they captured some of our civilians, and the next day after this was defended, the shooting continued and our forces, I don't know exactly who was up there, but I think some of our forces took militarily the village Kute which was half-half. They took it militarily, but I think they pulled out the civilians during the night. And already since that 24<sup>th</sup> June the conflict begins. Sporadic, but the men are on their positions. It wasn't as intense as it had been earlier, but the positions are established and everyone is on their positions. And the Muslims again go out to Krč, Relej and Seoce, it means, those positions that we had taken.

### **Then again...?**

They take the positions again, although they had been ours, taken, and they go out to Ciganske Livade. We did, I remember it, we did withdraw from the positions. But up on that Relej there was the flag and then they...Related to that Relej, Krč and Seoce which were very dominant elevations, we withdrew from them and the trenches had been filled in – as much as they had been in this so-called ceasefire. It was a ceasefire in the sense that there was no shooting, but it was also a time of preparation for some future conflict. So, the Muslims went out and took those positions. At one time during that ceasefire, up on Relej oftentimes there was a personnel carrier of the UNPROFOR who apparently controlled, monitored that situation. The

Muslims went out there, some time in June. There were some skirmishes because up on the Relej there was a large metal rod, a real relay, on which the flag was hanged up. It means, the positions were filled in, but the flag was there, and there were these skirmishes in the sense that they send a child up there to take down the flag, then the child takes down the flag, then our people put up the flag again, and they again send someone to take down the flag, so 2 – 3 times this flag...

### **This was during the ceasefire?**

This was during the ceasefire. It means, the positions didn't exist, there was no shooting, but the skirmishes around the flag continued, because it had been a Croatian flag. Our men had militarily taken the position and put up the flag, then they were removing it. It was in that period. Then I gave you the instance of 24<sup>th</sup> June when the conflict broke out, when Paraga and his team attacked that village from Jagnjid in the first part, toward Podovi, here we had a conflict and this more severe conflict lasted maybe a day or two on that area. But, I say, Kute were taken militarily, and one position, Stražica, and it had already started, it is the 24<sup>th</sup> June, the guards started, the keeping of positions and occasionally there was sporadic shooting. There was no severe, intensive fighting, but there was occasional rifle fire, especially in Bistrica, from the direction of the mining site. There is a mining site up there, some ore, I myself don't know what they are digging, gypsum, the gypsum mine, they are excavating up there and from that position a sniper had been active. Although the traffic is still going, the roads are used down in the direction of Bugojno, the cars are passing, transporting food, but there are not many pedestrians in the streets. As soon as darkness falls, the guards are active. That's how this conflict started. This last conflict, which did not stop until the signing of the Washington Agreement. It started in Uskoplje on 24<sup>th</sup> June, it means, I would call it the fourth conflict in Uskoplje, the first one was on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1992, the second was on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1992, the third one was on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1993 and it lasted until the

end of February and the fourth one began on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1993, on St. John's Day, with the attack on a part of Jagnjid, this part of Kute towards the church, and it lasted until the signing of the Washington Agreement. And in this conflict, whose intensity grew by the end, in the second half of July when the Muslims were at that moment much more numerous and militarily superior, they were regrouping the forces. It means, already in May, June, they militarily cleaned Travnik and shifted all their forces to Bugojno and they were undertaking a coordinated attack, they tied up their forces and attacked Bugojno, and in parallel attacked Uskoplje. By the end of July, precisely, around 29<sup>th</sup> July, the Muslim forces attacked the villages of Krupa, Ponir and that part, let's say the Croatian part of Vrše and took it militarily on the 29<sup>th</sup>. On that day, on that same day they took a Croatian village which is a pretty large Croatian village and one part of Bistrice, and at the same time, on that day or a day before, they militarily took Bugojno. I may be wrong about a day or two, but in any case, somewhere by the end of July, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> July Bugojno fell. It means, it fell militarily and many soldiers were captured, and civilians as well. A greater part of the civilians and soldiers pulled out from the direction of Bugojno in the direction of Kupres; it means, one part is going up there to the Serbs, and another part pulls out between the Serbian and Muslim lines toward Raduški Kamen. They pull out on Raduški Kamen where we received them, a large number of civilians and soldiers. This fall of Bugojno was a severe psychological shock for the Croats of Uskoplje: in a large number of Civilian Defence Forces (*domobrani*), and a large part of the population it raised fears, because Bugojno had a reputation of being very, very well armed, maybe the best armed. The HVO had a tank, they had heavy artillery, although there were some funny situations there too – the conflict was on, but they had joint warehouses with TO, and the like. I was telling you about the song that they had in Bugojno and which they played non-stop on the radio.

**How did the song go?**

"TO, HVO, salvation of Bugojno, nobody will ever separate us."

**And which melody was it?**

Well, I am not a great singer, I couldn't sing it for you and I wouldn't do it even if I could. It was funny to me even in those times. But it was non-stop on the radio. After the fall of Bugojno, in parallel with the fall of Bugojno, the Muslims went into action: they took Krupa and one part of Bistrica and our Headquarters of the Brigade "Dr. Ante Starčević" pulled out then. Several days earlier it had pulled out some of its parts, but it pulled out from its Headquarters, from Jaša, they also took it militarily in order for us to withdraw from Pavić Polje the next day in the evening. How it happened – I don't feel like talking about that now, what I know is that the assessment was that it would be difficult to defend Pavić Polje because the access was totally difficult, it went through this Hrasnica, this route was constantly covered by rifle fire and then the order came to pull out from Pavić Polje and to strengthen the line toward Bistrica. But, in the evening when they started to withdraw it became chaotic and simply, Pavić Polje pulled out completely and everybody was just fleeing. To my mind, this was a consequence of the fall of Bugojno, it was too much of a shock for the soldiers, for the people, they couldn't believe that such a strong and big Bugojno fell after 7, 8 days of fighting. So that this night, on July 31<sup>st</sup> the pullout began and in the morning, sometime at 6, 7 a.m. it is completely empty. It means, all the Croats had withdrawn: civilians had pulled out, everybody fled to Prozor Rama, the entire army had withdrawn, the lines in the town remained empty, everything was empty. It means, the lines where we held the line on one side of the street, and they held theirs on the other side of the street, they had withdrawn up to Pidriš, and now I can tell you quickly my personal story. I myself did not withdraw up to Pidriš but a group of us withdrew up above the town near an old cemetery, called Paloč, where we had certain warehouses, a storage of ammunition. Then someone destroyed that ammunition storage, so, I remember...here was Zrinko

Tokić and the late Čiča, some commanders were there, everybody was angry and sad for having militarily withdrawn, and then I asked Zrinko Tokić: "What is with that warehouse of food on Trnovača?", and he said "I have no idea", and I replied "Did you destroy it?", and he says "They didn't", and I said "I'm turning back" – I was always mad when I was going down there for food with that logistician, there the logistician never gave us good tin cans, but only some rubbish, and I say: "I'm turning back to set it aflame so they don't take it". He is shouting: "C'mon, leave the food, not now!" But we nevertheless returned down there to set it aflame, and when we were approaching, a large number of Croatian houses were already aflame – the houses that the people set aflame by themselves, their own houses. The then commander, the late Mate Kunkić set his own house on fire and simply said: "No one is going to live in it, no one is going to get a good night's sleep in it, I will set it on fire!" The houses were burning and I came down there to this road that leads toward Bugojno, and here on the road there was an UNPROFOR personnel carrier – who was not clear at all what was happening: it stood there, looked, the houses are burning, no people to be seen, no army, nothing, morning, 6. a.m. the dawn is breaking. We came beside them as if nothing was out of the ordinary, and went toward Bistrice to shoot a bit, and then we spoke on the Motorola with the late Mate and I tell him: "There is no one, the Muslims haven't noticed yet that we had withdrawn, no one has entered, what do we do!?"

**Actually, you were the first to come down there and define the situation?**

Except me there were three or four lads, and we were the first to come, not with the intention of returning, but to set this warehouse on fire, to destroy the food. And, by the way, as we had returned we went there to see whether anyone had entered, did anyone notice, and as we came to the furniture factory, a bit toward Bistrice, we saw that no one noticed a thing, that no one entered militarily although the lines were empty: about an hour or two the lines were empty. Then

we spoke on the Motorola with the late Mate Kunkić and with that team and I am asking: "What do we do? No one had entered!". And he says: "What do we do?" "We decided to return!", "Who is going to return?", "Better that we die here at our homes than that we all get killed there at Prozor! We are returning and that's final!" And then, we returned. On the entire line where perhaps 1500 soldiers have been, perhaps 30 to 40 of us returned, in a way I still can't understand...perhaps on every seventh or tenth bunker there was one man and he fired sporadically to give an impression that we didn't withdraw. And at that moment, I was up there, at that moment general Praljak comes onto the scene – because at that time he had come to Pidriš, and it was all sheer confusion, retreat, I wasn't there myself, but I heard the story when he climbed onto a tank and said: "I am going first, and all of you follow me, we must return!" And then hastily, a part of the men returned to the lines, and it was sheer luck that the Muslims hadn't noticed that we had withdrawn, that there was a retreat and also sheer luck that they didn't seriously attack us that day. Because the men that returned, militarily we couldn't have defended that. But it is a fact that general Praljak played a big role there with his attitude and his voice where he acted sharply, vehemently and tried to mobilize the people, make them return, and the people returned. And these lines to which we had returned then, these lines remained until the end of the war with the Muslims. There were certain movements, the Muslims take an elevation, than we take it back, or maybe the other way around, but these lines to which we returned on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1993 remained until the end of the conflict with the Muslims.

**Was that your first encounter with general Praljak?**

For me personally yes, it was my first encounter.

**You met him when they had already arrived, when he returned with the army – and you were the first to come...?**

I was the first one, i.e. not only me, there were three, four of us, we were the first who then came to the field to see what is happening, did they notice, or they didn't and so on...

**How many Croatian houses did the people themselves set aflame, approximately?**

What I saw maybe wasn't much, there were some 4, 5 houses, in that part that I saw. It means, this is the part Podgrađe, Trnovača and that part. There were not many houses, maybe 3, 4 houses.

**How about the food? Was it also gone?**

It was gone, yes. I will show you when you come to Uskoplje. It was burnt. Former hangars. I set it aflame to burn, and after that we left.

**But the people were already returning while their houses were still aflame?**

Yes.

**And how did the people react then?**

Well, they themselves set them on fire!

**I know.**

I don't know. When we returned, when we established the line, that same day in the

afternoon I went to Prozor, to Rama and met Praljak up there also. I actually went to tell the people, there were a lot of our soldiers in Prozor Rama, to tell them that the Muslims didn't enter, to tell them to return, the army came to help, that they should return and the people should return. That was the first time I met Praljak personally, but I was not present at the scene when...

**Yes...**

...because I was down here, and he was on Pidriš then. There were some other guys who told me that he had climbed on a tank and simply roared and compelled the people to return and it bore fruit, the people returned. I cannot say that Uskoplje was defended then, but it is interesting that than, as we had returned to those lines, they were defended until the end. There were small movements in one way or the other, sporadically, but it remained more or less in the same position.

**Were there any more meetings between you and general Praljak after that?**

I think that in that period, as far as I know, he became Commander of the HVO in the period June, July, in that period. My military assessments were such that at that time the HVO was in a deep retreat – and ABiH was on the offensive on all, on this entire battlefield, it was on the offensive, starting from central Bosnia, Uskoplje, in the period when general Praljak came. I think he was pulling chestnuts out of the fire. I think he was saving the situation and mending holes all the time. It means, they penetrated here, he tried to win it back. That's when I met him, 1<sup>st</sup> August, although we later, me and my Commander, the late Mate Kunkić, went to him to Prozor, and we proposed that, although we were weak and thin that we try to militarily take Relej once again. We proposed this for purely psychological reasons, because this Relej

was an essential point there, it was an important position for us in the town. We said: "Let's try to take that Relej." It was supposed to be a psychological factor which will let the people know that we are strong, that we are here, that we are fighting, and so on, and then we planned an action which was planned for the 4<sup>th</sup> August – and which was well planned. On 4<sup>th</sup> August 1993 we set out with the task to take Relej, but we didn't know that in parallel the Muslims had started an attack in the town which is down below Relej, maybe 500 metres of air line, which is close. On that day, 4<sup>th</sup> August we went into action to take Relej, and the Muslims went into action to take the inner centre of the town. They attacked down there, and we attacked up. They didn't succeed, but neither did we. This action was led by general Praljak, the action was well planned, well analyzed in advance – but we had a surprise factor which we didn't know about and it is called Ciganske Livade. When I take you to the terrain I will show you what it is.

**We will have a look and take some shots of Ciganske Livade.**

That's right. We tried then on the 4<sup>th</sup> August, I remember that general Praljak was up there on Kuk, they had a tank, they were covering us, we had our snipers on Kuk who covered these bunkers: the tank took care of the bunkers, the snipers covered with sniper fire, but when we moved to climb up there and came almost to the top of the Relej, maybe some 10, 15 metres from the bunkers, we only needed to jump into the bunkers – then the shooting started, straight on us, from the side. Then the four of us, me, the late Mato Kunkić, the late Miro and Boro, we simply saw that someone is firing from our back, we lay down, we didn't know who is firing, where the shots are coming from. And as we lay down, Miro was hit immediately, I rolled backwards, Mato remained lying, he pretended to be dead for an hour or two, so they wouldn't shoot at him, but then it became clear that we cannot take Relej in this manner and that it was an unsuccessful operation. The attempt had a purely psychological motive to return this Relej and to give people the hope that we can

defend ourselves, that we are worth something, that we are not weak – and then I met Praljak for the first time, it was our first action, which was, unfortunately, unsuccessful. We had one dead, but really we couldn't go any further, because we were on a clearing, and they fired on us from Ciganske Livade. Let me draw it to you, this is the town and here are Relej, Krč, Malo Seoce, and we are up here, we are keeping this hill and keeping this position from which everything can be seen. This is where the tank was shooting from, and we came through a water-worn ravine, we came here and climbed on the hill here. But, after our third conflict, after the third conflict they realized that they cannot maintain themselves on Relej, Krč and Seoce, because we have stronger artillery on these elevations and then they simply left these positions here, but at the same time they entered here into the woods and established a line here, this is the Ciganska Livada, here in the middle of these woods there is a meadow called Ciganska Livada, and this bunker here is covering Relej from the side. So that you cannot climb on the Relej because this one from 200 metres...this is an approximation, just for you to see. This was our first action on 4<sup>th</sup> August which was, unfortunately, unsuccessful because of these positions on Ciganske Livade which they didn't have in January 1993 and they didn't take them, but now, slowly, imperceptibly, secretly they had taken them and dug in here in the woods.

**It means, you didn't know it until you came up there?**

We didn't know. We didn't know until we had climbed on the Relej, until they fired on us.

**Did you have any other meetings with Praljak where you were together, and that we could talk about?**

Well, more or less, all are related to Ciganske Livade.

**So, how many times were you on Ciganske Livade with Praljak?**

No, just this once, because this action was undertaken only once.

**And then it was over?**

Then it was over.

**All right.**

But related to these Ciganske Livade, there was scouting around Ciganske Libade, reconnoitring, preparation of the terrain, all kinds of activities.

**All right, we will continue when we go there.**

All right.

**Is there anything else that we forgot to mention?**

Well, not really. Related to the conflict with the Muslims, at the beginning of August, not really the beginning, but let's say from 15<sup>th</sup> August, the second half of August, then September, the Muslim forces started a fierce offensive up on Uskoplje, where they were pounding on us so strongly, we were thinking that the Serbs were attacking us. I was on a position called Moščani. Simply, after Bugojno they captured a hell of a lot of things. They captured huge depots of ammunition, artillery pieces, one tank, they captured all of that and then with all of that, and with all the manpower and this equipment went up to Uskoplje to mount an offensive. So that this August, September, it was hell up there. On a few occasion they had penetrated through certain lines, then we were patching up, returning and so on. I remember one action with Praljak – on 15<sup>th</sup> September

1993 the Muslims attacked one position called Kuk, which is immediately above the town. There we had some 4, 5 bunkers. They scouted this a little bit, recorded it and then came from the rear and militarily took that position. From that position they directly controlled our part of the town and fired at us during the whole night – and then, I remember, again me and the late Mato went to Prozor, again to Praljak and asked him if there is any way he can help us to return that position as a matter of urgency. Then he helped us by giving us one tank which was supposed to be our support from Prozor. I remember the lad who drove this tank, his name is Markica – and then at 5 in the morning the action was on. As I say, Praljak was above, he was going from Stublić for hours, and we moved from below and the action was on at 5 a.m. – and until 8 we returned this position literally without casualties. It was swift, they took it a day before and held it, and we returned it immediately the next morning. We couldn't have survived otherwise in the town, we had to make that attempt.

### **Was Praljak forthcoming in that?**

Absolutely. He was a type, I was on a couple of meetings on Pidriš and there in Prozor, he was a man of action. It means, no long stories, but only concrete acts and what can be done and how.

Let me just say a couple of words for the end. These were the happenings in August, September, October, and in November our forces started a kind of a larger offensive on Uskoplje, which was in my view merely simulated – but the Muslims undertook an offensive on 22<sup>nd</sup> December: just before Christmas they attacked fiercely up there on Ždrimce, that part toward Ljubavna Stijena, and it was all... This Muslim operation was called, I think, "Opasač" (Belt) and it was similar to an operation carried out by the Partisans in World War II with the aim to... because when you look, Uskoplje was an obstacle to connecting this communication down toward

Jablanica. But, apparently even they did not have enough power then to take something like that, to keep it, so that it was fierce fighting. In January 1994 after we had mounted a bit stronger attack for those Ciganske Livade – Ciganske Livade were taken, again we came into possession of Krč and Seoce and then definitely the ceasefire was signed, the Washington agreement. This is as far as the war with the Muslims is concerned.

November 2005, Ljubuški