Interview was held and recorded in Split
Here we are, we are switched on. At the beginning of the record I will kindly ask you to introduce yourself, your name, last name, date and place of birth, occupation and residence?


Dr. Budimir, the motive for this interview is an indictment which was raised in The Hague against General Praljak, respectively, against the “sextet”. The prosecution’s thesis in one part of the indictment is a criminal conspiracy, a criminal enterprise. Hence, I would kindly ask you to remember that time, the war time, the war years and all which you participated in, that you know of. We could start from where were you at the beginning of the war? Hence, let’s start from the beginning. Where did the war find you and where did it lead you to?

Well, I was involved in the preparations for the defence of Croatia already on 1st of April 1991. During the whole period I was in the medical unit, i. e. in the Headquarters of the Ministry of Health. That is to say that all the approvals of the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Health and Ministry of the Interior. And, let’s say at the beginning of May 1991, I went to first field missions, to Vrlika and Sinj, we were preparing war hospitals, I took part in certain negotiations, I entered Kijevo. There were articles about that in the newspapers. For a while it was popular and journalists were writing about it. That is to say, just before the war during the barricades and so on. At the beginning of the war itself the organisation was completely different. After the attack on Vrlika area the organisation of medical corps and arrangement of war hospitals was different. I was involved all that time, until beginning of April 1992, when Kupres was attacked, i. e. area of Tomislavgrad and Livno. I joined the army as a volunteer and went to war. Why? Because I was working in Tomislavgrad for a while. I worked there for four years before I started my specialisation in Split and I simply felt a moral obligation to help those people. I also have relatives in the area. My ancestors come from Imotski but they moved to Tomislavgrad region between the two wars.

And you are coming here in April 1992?

That is right.

Can I just interrupt you and asks you the following; since at the time you already have the military experience from Croatia, please compare a situation to me, the one which was in Croatia to the situation in the area to which you came. What was the situation like in April 1992, as you arrive to this area? Up to which extent were the people aware of the upcoming war? What was the level of readiness for all this? What do you lack in at the time?

Soldiers were very poorly trained. At the time Muslims and Croats were members of the HVO and we were taking turns with Muslim and Croat colleagues in the area to be on duty in the war hospitals. Everyone had the same goal – to fend off the Serbian aggressor who was attacking at the time. However, the soldiers were not properly trained. There were a lot of injuries. To be more specific, during first eight days I
spent there, that is until 11th of April, I performed 226 operations. People did not now how to be careful, how to take care of themselves.

That is a lot. How big was the medical team working there? Were you able to cope under the pressure?

Well, those were not all difficult operations. There were smaller and larger interventions. For example, a smaller intervention on a small wounded surface. General Filipović was wounded at the time. He had a shell, an injury on the head. But at the same time, by chance I remember his name although it might not be important, Mr Vukadin from Šeonica area near Tomislavgrad, a part of his heart was blown off (there was no tamponing of the heart – author’s note )/marks made by the witness/

Thanks to the fact that it all happened very close to the war hospital and that he had tamponing of the heart, he did not bleed out. And I have literally opened his chest, grabbed it and sewn it. He went home on the fourteenth day.

It was as you were a wizard!

It wasn’t actually wizard like. It is, it simply happens. Somebody else is in charge of procedures. The situations are like that. After that we had a clean sift to take a break. However, two weeks later I went there again, when the colleagues who were there got tired. Since I was already a member of the Medical Corps of the then HR HB, the decision was made to start an entire war hospital in Rama. We have set it up at the beginning of May, that was while I was still in Tomislavgrad and sent a team to set up a hospital *** upon which we had decided in the diskette factory in Rumboci. At the beginning of May, because the enemy was approaching from the Kupres area, that is Kukavica and Zvirnjača, I had decided to go there. The plan was to have the same type of war hospital as in Tomislavgrad, to be able to take a large number of patients. And so it was done. However, the enemy was stopped near Zvirnjača, then at Ravašnica and Uskoplje, that is Makljen. At the time we were holding Bugojno together with Muslims. That was then. And we had the greatest losses caused by long range artillery. The most horrific war scene I remember is from that period. A shell fell on a private house in Prozor and killed two children while mother was brought ****, almost dead.

She actually died as soon as we put her on the operating table. We could not do anything. The intestines were out. And the most horrific scene was – a Muslim man running with her child – they were Croats – a child who was missing half a brain. That is the picture in my head – the brain jumping up and down, the remains of that brain in the scull while he was running and carrying the child from the medical vehicle to our war hospital. Those are the scenes which … I spent there a lot of time, maybe eleven months including breaks. There were all sorts of things. And in October, as far as I remember, yes, first fighting was in April, then May, then June and October. Muslims and Croats clearly came apart.

There is also the fall of Jajce, at the end of that year.

I was not in the area of Jajce. The colleagues from Zagreb were there. They were interns at the time. I think that only Dr. Barišić was a specialist. Kolak and Gverić were still interns. They were in this area. And they practically pulled the people out of
the surrounding. It was quite a lot on television. By trucks, in the middle of the night, without lights on…

In a bullet-proof bus?

…through the forest paths. Those were they. I don’t know of this. Later they came to Tomislavgrad, I was there as well. so…

Doctor, let me ask you the following thing; when we speak about the medical staff, about the establishment of medical staff – what was actually the idea of this medical staff? What did actually one want to achieve by establishing it and what were supposed to be its fields of affaires?

It was simply to introduce order into the medical corps, a necessary medical corps which was military and civil at the same time.

So, we had a small technical interruption in recording. We are talking about medical staff, about the idea of its establishment and everything it should deal with.

Medical corps had to take care of the wounded in battle and help civilians no matter which nationality they were. That was the case. There were no exceptions. Whoever came to the military hospital was taken care of, whether he was an enemy soldier or HVO member, Croat, Muslim or other. We have data on how many wounded, Muslims and Croats, we have treated during the time when it was all still HVO, when so-called **** was set up and they were special Muslim units fighting together with HVO, and when BH Army was established they simply left, that was when it became clear that a war would break out between Croats and Muslims. They joined the side which they believed was better for them. But even after that they were given equal treatment. It is all very clear if you check the data on the number of treated wounded men who were sent to the then largest war hospital in the country, Clinical Hospital Split. It is easy to see how many Muslim wounded men were treated, and they were soldiers. Soldiers! What we wanted to do was to alleviate that sad situation, that tragedy.

All right. During the days of establishment of the staff, it had some 20 to 30 members, I think.

We were in charge of 14 military hospitals. My responsibility was the part where I was the assistant for (mobile surgical teams – note of the author)/marks made by the witness/

Did all those hospitals, from the beginning till the end, remain within the medical staff, that is, were they equally available to everybody, according to the same criteria that we are now speaking about?

That is right.
They were?

That is right. They were always available. For example, there was a certain number of Muslims at the time, who remained in their houses and who had a full care, as well as everyone else who would come along.

After the period that you spent in Rama, you are leaving to Nova Bila?

To Nova Bila and to special police, here, on the fields.

Tell me, as a man, as a doctor, which of these periods and which of these places was the hardest for to?

The hardest? The hardest was Nova Bila, in Lašva Valley. People were in a mouse trap and shelled from everywhere. They simply had no choice, either to defend themselves or to die.

There were a lot of civilians there, right?

A lot.

Children?

Children, old people, soldiers… all of them.

The time of Nova Bila is the time when the conflict between the Croats and the Muslims is already ongoing, right?

Yes, yes. It took place already before the conflict ended.

That is right. I know it has been a while, I know it is hard to remember those things that we are discussing here – however, if you now wanted to present to somebody one of your working days, a normal, usual working day in Nova Bila, how would you describe it?

When I arrived there it was like entering Dante’s ninth circle of hell. I can just describe the operating theatre located in the monastery. It was 2.2 meters high, a little higher than me, some kind of a lamp, it was dark, the generator in the cellar was on, smoke coming out of that cellar, two operating tables. Food. The so called special welcome lunch which we had upon arrival was some kind of… I can not describe it as other than slimy cabbage prepared as **sarma** (minced meat in cabbage leaves – translator’s note), and in it were peaces of dry bread and bits of canned food. I do not know what kind of canned food it was. We were not used to this type of food since we were eating regularly and properly and we had difficulties eating this meal. We also smuggled two boxes of food in the helicopter. There were some wafers and we gave them to our female colleagues. They were delighted, like children. It was awful. And then work. We had to do all the pending operations. Standard operations and urgent ones. Because nobody knew what was going to happen. For example, we operated hernias on children in order to prevent complications in case it would not be possible
to operate on a later day simply because no doctors would be available in the area. We did not know how long this situation would last. We were working all that time. The church was the in-patient clinic. People were lying on the benches joined together. There were improvised beds on the floor made of mats and old blankets. People were lying on them and they were covered. It was horrible. There was a lot of blood. It was against all the principles and practice of modern surgery. However, I can tell you that there were very few infections, almost none. I was operating on people who underwent operations a year or two before and taking out osteosynthetic material, plates which we then sterilized, plates and bolts which we boiled so we can operate another person. Angle plates from thigh bone … horrible. Even in Austro-Hungarian Empire working conditions were better, at the beginning of the last century. I am talking here about sepsis, antisepsis and so on.

Tell me, in those conditions at the time, was there still a regulation in force that all who needed help were getting the help?

Yes, that is right.

Does that concretely mean that Muslims were also treated in Nova Bila at the time?

As soon as you asked me this question…let’s say there was the president of SDA of Lašva valley, Omer Malkić, who was the President of SDA (Democratic Action Party), was injured in the fighting. I do not know the details of the incident but he was brought to us, to the hospital. It was evening, I do not know the exact time. He practically bled out but was still alive. What to do? We had no choice. I could see immediately that one leg could not be saved, I think above the knee. I just stopped the bleeding on that leg and moved to the other one because there was high risk of losing it. I performed the reconstruction of the arteries, bones and sorted that. And I postponed the intervention in the stomach since the bleeding from the stomach was not acute. And then reconstruction of stomach, intestines and all the rest. He was there for two days while it was critical and transport would have been too risky. And then I contacted the representatives of the international forces via friar Grebenar and others, what were they called then? UFOR? KAFOR? UNPROFOR? It does not matter now. I think there was a captain or major Stuart. And there were some negotiations to transfer this gentleman to Split by helicopter. In any case I know that they consulted Muslim authorities in Sarajevo and they also agreed he was to be transferred to Split.

They agreed?

Oh yes. They did. However, UNPROFOR was the one stalling the transfer. They had tons of requests. I asked for transfer for all the wounded, heavily wounded, who could not receive adequate treatment in Franciscan hospital in Nova Bila. And after some haggling which lasted for 24 hours I think, we managed to fly a helicopter with 70 to 80 people, wounded patients, to Split. /marks made by the witness/
Who did this helicopter belong to?

It was ours. I can not remember now but I think it was a Croatian helicopter. I have to say another thing – Croatia did not send me to do that. I was a volunteer. This brings me back to the thesis, I forgot to say it before, about the criminal enterprise. It turns out that Croatia was planning a criminal enterprise against Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is absurd. Why would so much money and energy and resources have been used to save Muslim population as well? In case we were some kind of aggressors, in case we were planning to destroy or do anything else. Such thesis … I refuse, I refuse any insinuations of the kind.

Dr Budimir, I will ask you to give some details of the incident you have just mentioned. You remember when Mr Malkić came to the hospital, the President of the SDA whom you were rescuing?

I can not remember but it is easy to check in the records of the Franciscan hospital because everything was recorded. And there you can find data on all other Muslims who were treated, rescued, helped, whatever you like to call it. And an interesting fact is that a Muslim unit was fighting on the side of HVO in the Kruščica area. They were fighting as members of HVO. I remember wounded children who were coming to us. A girl, little one, was she Nermina Delić or Dedić, something like that… Dedić Nermina. I remember that child. Exceptionally difficult injury of the stomach, injured pelvis and so on, bones…

Also in Nova Bila?

In Nova Bila. And later she was treated on my ward in Split. Now I am only giving the names of the Muslims I can remember. But there are records. There are records in Split or any other war hospital in the area…

Please assist me here, if you can, in terms of searching through the protocol; what are the dates, approximately?

1993, 1994, but it isn’t a problem to find it. It certainly is not a problem to find it. Somewhere around that time. From mid 1993 till, let’s say, mid 1994.

Doctor Budimir, I will ask you again – what can I do when I have to pose such smart questions. Let us talk about the specific case of the gentleman who was heavily wounded, who was the President of the SDA. When you were treating him, when you took care of him in the Bila hospital, was that done in secrecy, illegally…

No, no…

It was something that was done in the hospital on regular basis and well known?

It was known. Everybody knew about it. I am talking about the entire medical staff and others, for example friar Grebenar and I think Livaković or something, the other priest. People were coming, it was known. He was lying with other wounded patients until we transferred him to Split for better treatment. When after a month I came to
Split from Nova Bila, I visited him. What was happening after that I do not know, I lost contact. But in any case he was taken care of, and discharged from our hospital. Also Ejup Ganić was in our hospital in Split…

That is correct. But that was later.

That was in 1995.

That is right. Doctor Budimir, if I understand you correctly – correct me if I am wrong – hence, treatment of the aforementioned gentleman in Bila, and then in Split was not an exception?

No.

He wasn’t the only Muslim treated?

No.

And the fact that you treated people in Nova Bila hospital was actually a position of the hospital which has been ready all the way and did what was necessary in order to help those who needed help, right?

Well, I could accept it in that way, but again, it wasn’t just the position of the hospital. What could the hospital have done, respectively, the staff if that hadn’t been a position of the official politics and former military powers?

I agree. Mr. Budimir, did we forget to mention something?

Even if we did, I am always at disposal. Anything you need, just contact me. I don’t find it difficult to come over for this kind of matters and give my testimony. I cannot accept, I simply cannot accept the fact that this was a criminal undertake/enterprise.

Interview conducted by Lada Puljizević
Transcript made by; Zdenka Omrčen
Zagreb, April 2007
STATEMENT

I, Dražen Budimir, born in Split on 20th of March 1958, PIN 2003958330169, with residence in Split, Peričićeva 4. At request of General Praljak’s defence team, I gave a statement on events during the war in RH and R BH. The statement refers to events that I know of and in which I was involved in person. If necessary, I am ready to testify about those events before the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague, in person or through video-link. I also agree and allow that my statement is used and published for the purposes of defence case.

In Zagreb, on 30th of May 2007

Signature: /signed/
STATEMENT

I, Dražen Budimir, the undersigned, hereby declare that in March 2007 I voluntarily gave a statement to defence counsel of Mr Slobodan PRALJAK regarding the events in which I participated, and which relate to the war in the Republic of Croatia and/or the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I agree to have my statement used in the proceedings before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and to have it made public. I am prepared to appear as a witness in the proceedings that are being conducted before the ICTY against Slobodan PRALJAK in The Prosecutor v. Prlić et al. case.

I hereby state that prior to giving my statement to defence counsel for General Slobodan PRALJAK and prior to having the statement notarized, I was instructed to tell the truth and that giving a false statement constitutes a crime pursuant to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Croatia and the ICTY Rules.

I declare that I have understood the instructions and that everything in my statement is true and accurate to the best of my knowledge and recollection.

I have read my statement carefully and it fully coincides with my statement. (When reading the statement I corrected the mistakes in the transcript.) I have signed the transcript.

In Split, 25 April 2008 /signed/