

HAKIJA MEHOLJIĆ, HEAD OF THE REGIONAL BUREAU FOR RETURN TO SREBRENICA

SREBRENICA WAS SACRIFICED FOR THE DAYTON BOSNIA

That is when President Izetbegović told me something that shocked me.

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INTERVIEWER: Sulejman SOLDIN

For 23 years I worked as a police officer. When the aggression started, I was in Srebrenica. Local police forces fell apart, as did the municipal management which on 17 April 1992 invited several responsible men to agree on the ultimatum they got from JNA¹. At that time, there were no military formations in Srebrenica. There were some private weapons and, of course, weapons that belonged to the police, which I took out of Srebrenica.

Municipality management then decided to surrender Srebrenica. They left the Municipal building and people started leaving town in droves. Nevertheless, a large number of them stayed. The next day, around 13.30 o'clock, shelling from the surrounding hills started, directed precisely at those parts of the town where the population was 100% Bosniak. That is how the war had began, one that would last until 18 April 1993 when the UN forces entered Srebrenica. That is when I was appointed Chief of Police.

When the demilitarisation of Srebrenica was conducted (28 September 1993), suddenly a message arrived from Sarajevo: Srebrenica delegation was to urgently come to Sarajevo for a discussion. Ten people were designated. However, one member of the delegation did not want to go and only nine headed on that trip. I was among those nine. We arrived to the Sarajevo airport in a helicopter, and from there were taken the *Holiday Inn* building in an armoured personnel carrier to. This is the introduction to the inexhaustible topic of Srebrenica as told by Hakija Meholjić, acting Head of the Regional Bureau for Return to Srebrenica.

• **What are all the things that were unusual about that summer? Srebrenica was in fact in encirclement and, in a certain way, not even a single bird could get out of it?**

MEHOLJIĆ: Before we headed there, Serb forces and UNPROFOR agreed to let the Srebrenica delegation's helicopter fly to Sarajevo. How and who agreed on it – I don't know. We were told that the flight would be safe. Although neither one of us nine wanted to accept that on our way to Sarajevo we first had to land in Han Pijesak so we could be checked, they somehow still allowed us to travel without that landing.

When we got to the *Holiday Inn*, we were awaited there by Mr. **Alija Izetbegović**, accompanied by **Dragan Vikić**, who was his security guard. I remember that particularly well.

When we entered one of the hotel rooms, it was just the nine of us and Izetbegović. There was no one else, and no one took any minutes. That is when Izetbegović asked us, "**How are you, my dear Srebrenica men?**" We all answered in unison, "**We are good! How are you, President?**" That was the first time we went out of the encircled Srebrenica where we spent quite some time without water and electricity, so we were bizarrely glad to see the President. That is when the President told us something that shocked me, "**You know what? Clinton is offering me to allow Chetniks to enter Srebrenica and massacre 5,000 Muslims and then there will be a military intervention. What do you think about that?**"

We all revolted at that proposal. I was the loudest. Because, who is the one to decide for 5,000 Muslims to be massacred, who but God himself can decide who is to be massacred? It was all very nauseating. It was immediately clear to me that they were looking for someone to sacrifice in order for the NATO military intervention to happen. I felt my instincts speaking to me. Allah Jalla Shanuhu was telling me that it was a done deal. After persuading us, he told us literally, "**They are offering me to exchange Srebrenica for Vogošća. What do you think about it?**" We then replied, "**President, if you called us to present a fait accompli, you should not have called us at all. Because we can't go back now, and also, we have no mandate to negotiate on the exchange of territories.**" That was once again a confirmation that they did not want to defend the entire BiH, and that a division had already been arranged, one which was not clear to us.

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EXCLUSIVE [interview]

We agreed to continue the conversation the next day, but that conversation never happened, and still what did happen was contact with other people. Everyone probably had the task to talk with someone, and with whom, I don't know. I only know that I talked with one man from MUP² who asked me to accept what was requested of me and to stay in Sarajevo for seven days after the delegation leaves, and then I would be transported to Žepa on some unannounced flight, from where I would return to Srebrenica on foot.

• **That means the conversations were held in groups?**

MEHOLJIĆ: It all happened at the *Holliday Inn*. When I gave the staying some thought for the purpose of finding out what was happening, and when our entire delegation met, they all told me I should stay. It was immediately suspicious that they knew what I talked about with that man from MUP. I assumed that they talked with them about me staying because I was the loudest and about trying to blame it on me like I accepted that proposal because I was the only one who didn't respond to it and who opposed it.

• **What exactly did you say to Mr. Izetbegović?**

MEHOLJIĆ: I said, "**Are you insane? Who's the one who is going to separate the people to those who will be massacred and who won't?!**" those were my exact words about Clinton's proposal to him.

• **That was 28 September 1993...**

MEHOLJIĆ: Yes, Srebrenica had already been demilitarised. The next day, we didn't have a conversation with Mr. Izetbegović. I was scared that they were planning on liquidating me, so I looked for my friend from MUP with whom I spent almost all of my free time. Later they proposed several times again that I stay in Sarajevo for a few more days. However, I rejected it and returned with the delegation to Srebrenica.

• **What was the mood like on the way back?**

¹ Translator's note: Yugoslav People's Army

² t/n: Ministry of Interior

MEHOLJIĆ: During the trip we talked among each other. But I must say that certain members of the delegation were truly sensible men who were looking ahead. Upon arriving to Srebrenica, we concluded that Srebrenica was probably sold and it was only a matter of the manner in which it would all play out. We agreed not to tell the people because it could have created chaos concerning the combinations that were made. However, some did not adhere to what we agreed on and they talked about it, so the selling was an open secret in Srebrenica. Everyone knew what happened in Sarajevo.

- **Out of the nine delegation members, how many of them are alive now?**

MEHOLJIĆ: The delegation members were the following: **Fahrudin Salihović**, the then Mayor, **Osman Suljić**, President of the Assembly, **Hajrudin Avdić**, President of the Club of SDA Councilmen, **Meho Uštić**, Councilman, **Nedžad Bektić**, Assistant Commandant for Security, **Ramiz Bećirević**, Chief of Staff, and his brother, whose name I cannot remember. There was also a representative of Bratunac area, whose name I cannot remember either, and I was the last member. Two members of that Srebrenica delegation are not alive today.

- **From this time distance, do you think that was the first time that the selling of Srebrenica was decided or did that happen earlier?**

MEHOLJIĆ: Throughout the entire war there were rumours that Srebrenica had already been sacrificed and the Serbs too were saying that the territories 30 km from the Drina River will not survive, and so on. My opinion is that Srebrenica was a victim, because the international community needed one such victim and one such genocide to intervene and stop the war that was becoming rampant. Srebrenica was sacrificed for the Dayton Bosnia. Because, if you remember, after the fall of Srebrenica, there was a trade of another territory. I have great respect for the General **Atif Dudaković**, but taking three towns in five days is still a little bit too much. I am not saying that he was a part of that trade, but the political and military elites did some things together with the international community, the war was ended, and the Dayton signed. Now everybody is talking about Srebrenica, it is a priority, but it's really nowhere to be found. It cannot be the UN's conscience, because the UN has no conscience, as even after the fall of Srebrenica, scumbags are in places there. The UN has no moral right to exist. You know, if you are guarded by someone, and 11 thousand people get killed, that that someone disgraced itself and has no right to exist.

- **The Srebrenica tragedy started on 11-13 July 1995 and it continues after the war as well...**

MEHOLJIĆ: The Srebrenica post-war tragedy is in fact a tragedy of the people of Srebrenica not learning from the war and not those sinister July days. We are disunited, the international community, both entities' authorities, and especially the RS authority, take advantage of perfectly. The Dayton signatories shouldn't have allowed for Srebrenica to stay within the RS, because it cannot survive among those that committed the greatest crime of the 20th century after the Second World War.

- **You can stumble upon displaced people from Srebrenica anywhere in the word. Was the plan of ethnic cleansing that area achieved?**

MEHOLJIĆ: Nothing happens by accident. People from Srebrenica are getting visas for moving to the third countries. It's systematically done and it's known that even now refugees are being sent from Switzerland to the third countries. Which means it's a one-way ticket.

There will come a time when someone will join the UN, someone who's not a sellout like Kofi Annan, and will feel guilty about what they had done to this area, someone who will at least find the strength to apologise to the victims' families. Their aim is to further displace the people so they would not be united and would have constant reminders of the errors of the international community, as well as military and political authorities of BiH.

- **Everyone is *dancing* around Srebrenica. As a person responsible for the return to Srebrenica, what is your opinion on the clashes between the political parties before the elections?**

MEHOLJIĆ: The more they mention Srebrenica, the less people from Srebrenica stay in BiH. And certainly in Srebrenica as well. I think Srebrenica does have a chance, but it will depend on us alone and on the people who would exercise authority, and who understand the Srebrenica tragedy. Then it will have a chance, because it must win. The dead wouldn't allow Srebrenica to be forgotten either.

There is no code of conduct in BiH; many falsehoods are stated. I would not say that the people from Srebrenica got many appropriations and that those appropriations were stolen. Maybe they were misdirected by the donator, and I would not say that some humanitarian organisations did it, but let me tell you something: What if someone got a million and eight hundred Euros for education of Srebrenica men, and they used that up? I am referring to one organisation from Tuzla, not from Srebrenica. Someone approved of that project, and the question to ask is who. We should also ask the question of whether the Netherlands' Government properly allocated the use of those appropriations, and if someone had stolen something – that someone should be held responsible for it. I do not see that the Netherlands reported the use of those allocations anywhere.

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EXCLUSIVE [interview]

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The Netherlands is now constructing buildings in Ilijaš where they are placing Srebrenica refugees so they would leave Serb houses. Instead of constructing houses in Srebrenica, the Netherlands is doing it in Ilijaš, which means that it does not want those people to return to Srebrenica. Last year, a stone was placed on which it states Srebrenica 11 July 1995, and last year they brought one nišan³ to show us how nišans would look in that mezarje⁴ and that memorial. It's shameful.

- **When you remember that 28/29 September 1993, how do you see that sleepless night now?**

MEHOLJIĆ: It's very hard to describe that night because you find yourself in an inexplicable state. After so much time in encirclement, you arrive to the *Holiday Inn*, you are completely lost in time and space, and suddenly you get a slap: we should let Serbs massacre 5,000 men for a military intervention to happen.

- **There are many unexplained moments about the fall of Srebrenica? Could Srebrenica have been defended?**

MEHOLJIĆ: In the period from 1992 until the demilitarisation of Srebrenica and Žepa, there were attempts of cooperation with Žepa on the military engagement in joint defending of the area. Some attempts were successful; there were problems as well, but there was cooperation. We figured if Žepa fell, Srebrenica would fall too, and vice versa. People thought that those two places are one and the same fate, but there weren't enough competent men that would lead the army. They were all war commandants, but no one had finished military academy. Taking into consideration what Srebrenica and Žepa had at their disposal, I think that the area couldn't have defended itself for a longer time, if nothing maybe they would last a few days but not longer than that.

- **The fact is that there weren't enough weapons, with the embargo...**

³ t/n: type of upright Muslim stone tombstone in BiH

⁴ t/n: Muslim graveyard

MEHOLJIĆ: On the front page of Walter magazine (the last issue) I was looking at Jacques Paul Klein and the UN that disarmed the Srebrenica people and put them in a waiting room of the slaughterhouse. It was exactly like that. We handed over two tanks, multiple mortars and cannons, howitzers, and multiple VBRs⁵, essentially all the weapons that could have helped in the defending. Of course, with the exception of light [weapons]. That's what the Dutchmen, and before them the Battalion from Canada, were [illegible: waiting for?].

- As a man from Srebrenica, do you think that the Battalion from the Netherlands could have helped you?

MEHOLJIĆ: I truly do not know what orders did their commandant [illegible: get?], [illegible] behaviour of certain Dutch soldiers [illegible]. But in my opinion, that wasn't a team that could have defended Srebrenica without strong air support, because the enclave was not being attacked from just one location.

- **The absence of air strikes announced the fall of Srebrenica? They mentioned General Janvier the most before the French Parliamentary Commission?**

MEHOLJIĆ: The Chetniks shelled Srebrenica so much... It was chaos. They were narrowing the encirclement around the town slowly and the last three days before the fall of Srebrenica it got violent in the town itself. There were random shootings, civilians were killed and wounded, and the hospital was crowded. In the evening of 10 July 1993, the Dutch Commandant came to our Post to tell us that the next day, 11 July, there would be an air strike and that a death zone was decided on, and anything that would be moving in that zone would be destroyed by the aviation. I asked him what would happen if that doesn't happen. He said, "**Then Srebrenica will fall tomorrow.**" That is when I suggested we attacked from the back and drove the Chetniks into the town, because that could be done during the night. There weren't any mines there. However, the military brass did not agree with that. At that point, most citizens wished that NATO would bomb. Bomb both us and them, as long as that intervention happens. We were somewhat doubtful about whether the NATO strike would happen at all, which proved to be correct. Sometimes around half past one, the first airplane came along. In that moment, I was in a place from where one could clearly see that the aircraft dropped its payload in one brook, and I thought that was a warning because there was one tank nearby. When the airplane went back, a minute or two later, another one came along and that's when I thought that the NATO intervention was finally happening. However, it dropped its payload somewhere far in the background and there was a strong explosion. Then there was a smoke screen and Srebrenica fell.

- **You left Srebrenica through the forest...**

MEHOLJIĆ: I travelled for six days and seven nights through the forest and Chetnik ambushes all the way to Tuzla. I asked around looking for the military brass, and I was told they were in Potočari, in Šušnjari. At ten o' clock at night, I went over there and heard that they had made a decision to head towards Tuzla. I was among those who thought it was best to head immediately. However, a lot of people stayed in the villages so we tried to gather them. At 2 o'clock at night, on 12 July 1995, we headed above the village of Kravice [sic]. The morning arrived and we tried to rest there. There were those who advocated going further, and saying that where we would meet the Chetniks – we would shoot. Even that was a better solution than waiting for the dark in order to move because we gave them space to set ambushes. Then the fire started and that's where most people were killed and captured. When the shooting started from all sides, I found myself behind one fern and I focused and headed down one brook where I saw a lot of dead. After walking one kilometre I met the people and I drank some water there after which my tongue went numb because the water was poisoned. We crossed the Jadar River, and people were *floating* in it.

On 13 July, we gathered on Orlić and started quarrelling. Over the radio, **Rasim Delić** asked all the people to come back to Srebrenica because *everything was normal in it*. That's why some decided to go back. If we lost three to five thousand people on the road in Konjević Polje and Kravica, it's impossible that everything is normal. That's when it became clear that the political elites in Sarajevo didn't know what was happening in Srebrenica. We headed further until Boškovići where we tried to contact the Serbs, asking them to let us pass without shooting at us. They stalled answering us for two or three times, saying that we were encircled by a military corps. We responded, "**Even if we're encircled by ten corps, we will pass.**" Right before the night fell, it started hailing so **Ejub Bojić** took the first tank and we broke through their lines and crossed over to the terrain under control of the Army of BiH. And that is how I arrived in Tuzla on 17 July.

- **Since then, it is as if the people of Srebrenica are on a never-ending business trip, going in circles and further away, from a reception centre to a refugee camp, from one town to another, from country to country. Will that trip ever lead towards Srebrenica?**

MEHOLJIĆ: I do think that the people of Srebrenica will return; of course, never in that same number in which they were present before the aggression. I think that the RS Government is trying more and more each day for Srebrenica not to remain a part of the RS, because the international community will have to correct its mistake. The Serbs are given precedence in everything, and everyone else are second class citizens. Those who signed for Srebrenica to be a part of the RS without including me on that and without my signature there, had no right to do so. Not Alija Izetbegović, not anyone. Because Srebrenica belongs only to the people of Srebrenica.

- **Will it be enough for those same people of Srebrenica for one Desnica Radivojević to appear, for the coexistence to be possible?**

MEHOLJIĆ: I do not wish to offend Desnica, but one can't live off kind words. You cannot shop anything in Srebrenica because nothing is in business. Not a single Bosniak who could bring his family to this town is hired in the administration. By reconstructing the infrastructure and residential properties, this town can give many people jobs and through that encourage them to return. The whole process of the return is not directed at the benefit of those people, but instead at the benefit of the Serbs for whom houses are built. And those same criminals are being begged to return, while Bosniaks have to stay under tents in order to return.

- **Today when you summarise the fates of the surviving people of Srebrenica, as well as those of the dead, it is almost as if that offer by Alija Izetbegović was less risky of a solution?**

MEHOLJIĆ: Everyone's a general after the battle. Because, no one knew how that would end. In life, a man chooses one path, not knowing what would happen on the other. ■

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[excerpt from interview: in text box on page 2]

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⁵ t/n: multiple rocket launcher