Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Residents of the Yellow Building, Grbavica

Rizah Pašalić

Chapter I

A Shot

In a fraction of a second there was no connection between Diki's senses and his brain. He could not comprehend or explain to himself any of the things that were happening around him. He closed his eyes, reflexively, at the moment a shot was fired. The sound was deafening. He inhaled the pungent smell of gunpowder that overpowered all the usual smells around him. He was completely paralyzed by fear. He realized he was still alive, perhaps he had been injured? He ran his hands over his ribcage. Although his clothes were slippery from something wet, he felt he was not hurt. Some kind of liquid was running over his eyelids, blurring his vision. He tried to remove it with his fingers. He then spontaneously licked the wet fingers and realized that the liquid was salty and full of some small, hard particles. He blinked a few more times and his vision finally cleared; his eyes all teary from gunpowder-infused gases saw his blood-covered hands and the dead body of a soldier. He was just a few steps away from a bearded man dressed in a military uniform who was sitting in a chair with his head tilted backwards. Instead of a hairy scalp, he could now see an open, bloody skull that resembled a monstrous goblet. The liquid he licked must have been made of blood and fractured skull. Horrified, he vomited on the trousers of the dead soldier and tripped over something on the floor, as he fell on his knees the severe pain in the shin instinctively compelled him to reach for a thing under his feet. His hand grabbed a hot Kalashnikov rifle. The pungent smell of gunpowder gases rose up his nose, and it seemed to him that the barrel was still smoking. "A smoking gun" he said spontaneously, or maybe he had just said it in his mind because he was unable to hear his own voice.

"The smoking gun" remained stuck in his mind for another ten seconds, while he looked around at his neighbors in the room. They were opening their mouths, saying or shouting something, but Diki could not hear them. He saw Dusko, completely covered in blood, trying to fully embrace Vesna, probably in an attempt to calm her down. Vesna resisted, opening and closing her mouth, glancing towards the ceiling. Diki followed her gaze and saw a big stain of blood at the white ceiling that was dripping the blood and brains of the dead soldier. Diki looked at Mujo who had both his hands on his head and was opening and closing his mouth, walking from one

corner of the room to the other. Strangely enough, there were no traces of blood on Mujo.

Suddenly, Diki's hearing returned in his right ear. Just in time to hear Vesna's air-piercing scream and the sound of a slap that Dusko gave her. Mujo stopped in his tracks for a second, bewilderedly looked at Vesna and Vlado and then continued his crazy walk from wall to wall, continuously repeating:

-You killed a Chetnik! [1] We are all fucked now!

– Stop it, I will slap you too! – Dusko shouted at Mujo. – I did not kill him, he killed himself. I will go to the Serb headquarters and tell them what happened.

Mujo went quiet. He pressed his hands harder on his head and continued his walk from wall to wall. Vesna was standing still, looking at the deceased soldier with an icy glare.

The strong buzzing in his left ear suddenly stopped, so Diki started hearing the silence in the room. Nobody said a word. It was completely quiet in the room and that turbulent day of war, the 2nd of May 1992 was slowly coming to an end. Some explosions were going off from time to time, somewhere closer to downtown Sarajevo; some young Serb soldiers were shooting long bursts from their improvised bunker – a window in an apartment nearby — aiming at the empty street. Although some ten minutes ago the events in the city were of utmost importance to the people in this room, their importance was now sidelined.

Dusko interrupted the silence:

> When I go to the HQ I will ask them to draw my blood and test it for alcohol, and they should test him too – he pointed his head at the dead soldier.

As if he wanted to take part in the discussion, the soldier or rather his body released a rattle and the smell of stale alcohol engulfed the room.

Vesna screamed in horror, but managed to pull herself together in an instant and said very calmly but determinedly:

> Dusko, you are not going anywhere!

Kneeling on the ground, Diki looked at the soldier's head once again. At that moment, some yellowish liquid poured from the soldier's mouth and onto his blood-covered beard. Diki suddenly stood and walked towards the door.

> Where are you going? – Dusko asked.

> To vomit! – mumbled Diki.

A phone rang as he was leaving the room. Not the real phone, but a toy. All phone lines had been cut off 24 hours before. The toy phone was used by residents of the building No. 17, in Street of *Partisan Brigades* in Sarajevo's Grbavica [2] settlement, as

a communicative tool between those who took shelter in the basement of the building and those “on duty” at the first floor, peeking through a window and controlling an entrance into the building.

Chapter II

A Deal

Diki entered the bathroom and vomited the contents of his stomach into the toilet bowl. Automatically, he tried to flush it but could only hear air rustling in the water tank. He remembered that the water and electricity supply had been cut off this morning and that there was no water in the apartment – not even a single drop. He then saw his bloody reflection in the mirror. He felt a renewed horror. There were some ten liters of water in a bucket in the bathroom. He washed his blood-covered hands. He looked around and saw a dirty laundry basket. He feverishly emptied it. He took some dirty T-shirt and sweatpants. A previous resident was more or less of his built and size. He, his wife, and his children left the apartment some ten days ago, leaving the key with Dusko. Diki was still thinking about the smoking gun phrase. They were the words he said for the first time, as a young actor, in a TV show made some ten years ago. Yes, it is just the smoking gun, this is not real, it is too irrational, it must be a film or a theatre play. He quickly tore off his clothes and threw them in a laundry basket, as if he was taking off a costume after the final act of some play. He poured some of the remaining water in a sink, trying to wash his face and hair, but as pink liquid was still dripping from his hair he added more water and some shampoo. There were red traces left at a towel he used. He thought of washing up again, but saw that there was just a single liter of water left in the bucket. He felt discomfort at realizing that had used all that precious water. It was time to go back in the room with the dead man. He slowly opened the bathroom door and moved along the corridor towards the living room. Behind the closed kitchen door he could hear voices; he recognized Vesna’s and Dusko’s voice. So, they too were no longer in the room with the dead man. He changed his mind suddenly and turned towards the dining room. It was some time ago he noticed a liquor cabinet there. Although the remaining residents of building No. 17 had made a deal not to take other people’s possessions, Diki concluded that the deal did not apply to situations such as this one. He opened an almost full bottle of whiskey and took few sips. Alcohol removed the taste of vomit from his mouth and recharged him. He closed the bottle and carefully returned it to the cabinet. And then suddenly changed his mind. He took the bottle again and went back to the bathroom. He locked the door quietly, sat on the closed toilet bowl and started drinking whiskey.

After some time, Diki peeked through the window. A warm day, almost summer-like, was coming to an end. The Serb Army was still shelling the downtown, but JNA airplanes were no longer flying over the city. With an exception of several gunshots, Grbavica was peaceful. The window of the toilet had a view of the backyard; there was a smallish, single storey house at the other end of the yard where children had played in the peacetime; Serb soldiers were moving weapons and things into it now.

Diki heard someone attempting to open the bathroom door. While he was trying to hide the whiskey bottle in the cupboard, he heard knocking on the door. He thought

he should answer. He heard Vesna's voice.

Diki, if you are inside, say something.

After a short pause Vesna shouted loudly:

Dusko, Mujo, something is going on. Diki has locked himself in the bathroom.

Diki unlocked the door quickly. Not waiting for Diki to come out, Vesna pushed through her way into the bathroom. She briefly looked at the reflection in the mirror. Her face and body were covered in blood but not as much as Diki's had been. She reached for the water basket but when she saw that it was almost empty, she angrily said to Diki:

Get out, you drunken and shameless man!

Diki obeyed without complaint. He left Vesna in the bathroom and entered the kitchen.

Mara, his neighbor from the third floor was in the kitchen with Dusko and Mujo. Though the blinds, Mujo looked at the street towards the entrance into building No. 17 while Mara and Dusko sat at the table with the Kalashnikov rifle, documents and a photograph of the killed soldier at the table.

In a reproaching tone, Dusko asked Diki:

Where have you been?

Not waiting for an answer, he simply continued:

We agreed on all the details. Vesna is an experienced judge. According to her, what happened should be regarded as an accident or a second degree murder. In the peacetime, the court would normally take us into custody for a few days until the end of an investigation and then investigative proceedings would be suspended, and we would be released from jail. But under these circumstances we would very likely be interrogated by some soldiers, possibly mistreated, and they would perhaps even be looking for a revenge because we killed their friend. Therefore, we will wrap Jovan Murirović into a piece of military tent and, when the children go to sleep, we will take him to the other part of the basement and bury him under the charcoal stored there. When things calm down, or when we get liberated either by those from the town or when Serbs establish some governance, I will report to the police and tell them about the things that have happened here. For now we will hide the rifle, the documents and his personal belongings We will inform all adult residents of the building about this. Of course, we will not say anything to the children.

While Dusko was speaking, Vesna had entered the kitchen. She no longer had traces of blood on her hands and face but her clothing was still covered in it. Vesna started issuing instructions:

I'm going to change, and you write your statements about the incident.

Here are pens and paper. Each one of you should write your first name, last name and date of birth, and add – under moral and criminal responsibility, I declare – followed by your description of what you saw and heard.

But I was not there! – interrupted Mara.

You will write what you saw when you came here – answered Vesna and left the kitchen.

It got dark in the kitchen. They lowered the window blinds, pulled the curtains and lit a candle. Diki stared at the identity card of the deceased soldier:

Jovan Murirović, born in Krajiste, near Bijeljina on the 20th of July, 1962. The photograph showed a beardless face of a wonderful country boy. What made him decide to grow a beard [3] and take a rifle, instead of going around, visiting sit-together parties and country fairs?

A few moments later, all of them began to write their statements.

Chapter III

Statements

I, Diki Dedic, born in Sarajevo, on the 27th of November 1952, hereby declare, under moral and legal responsibility:

The shooting in Grbavica, and in the city, was much more intensive on the 2nd of May, early in the morning, than it had been in the previous few days. All residents of our building took shelter in the basement. We jointly prepared a room called the laundry room for our stay. We closed the windows with wooden boards to protect ourselves from bullets. Electricity was cut off so we sat by candlelight. Our transistor radio reported that the fighting was going on throughout the city. Grbavica had been under control of Serb military forces for some ten days. Occasionally, one of us would go out of the basement to see what was happening outside. One of the neighbors said that he saw soldiers going in and coming out of some buildings in our street. Our entrance hall was locked and the intercom and electric lock were out of order. According to our internal deal Dusko, Josip and Adi unlocked the apartment of Milentija Jovanovic and entered it. The Jovanovic's family left Sarajevo some ten days ago. The apartment was on the first floor, and it had a good view of the street and entrance to our building. The deal was that once the soldiers come to our door, one of the residents "on duty" would run downstairs and let them into the building, so that they would not break the front door open, as they had done in a neighboring building.

Around ten o'clock, Dusko, Josip and Adi brought five soldiers into the laundry room. They did not have any ranks, but the one with the five-pointed star on his cap, significantly older than the others, was obviously in charge. Others had no insignia on their caps. Jovan, the killed soldier, was among them. He was the only one with a moustache and beard. The first thing they asked us was whether we had any weapons

and whether all current residents of the building were present. They said they would not harm us. We offered them a drink; two of them had a cognac each and Jovan had two. He said he had fought in Vukovar [4] and that the fighting in Sarajevo was child's play compared to the fighting in Vukovar.

Two soldiers were constantly with us in the basement, while the other two, together with the one in charge, went to inspect our apartments. They asked who lived on the ground floor – apartments to the left and the right and on the first floor – so they took the residents of these apartments with them to unlock the doors and show them their documents and around the apartments.

I was accompanied to my apartment by the soldier with the five-pointed star on his cap and another more senior soldier who said that the war would be over in ten days, as well as a young one who immediately recognized me as an actor from the television series. They superficially examined the apartment, opened and closed cabinets and several drawers. They asked me about my wife and a daughter, so I said they had left to Vojvodina [5] to stay there with some relatives, although they were actually staying in Croatia. All in all, the soldiers had been acting fairly.

The killed soldier, Jovan was among those soldiers who went with Vesna to her apartment. After returning to the basement, Vesna told me that he touched her behind but she told him not to be rude.

I was tired of sitting in the dark basement, so at about six o'clock I went to the first floor. Dusko and Mujo were "on duty" there. The room was almost dark, blinds were drawn, and the windows were closed by planks and mattresses to protect us from bullets. The only window that was partially free was the one in the dining room, through which we looked at the entrance of the building. I saw some soldiers occasionally running across the street. Something exploded somewhere in the street at approximately 6.30. We heard glass crushing and saw black smoke. We tried to see where did it come from but could not see anything. Then Jovan, the killed soldier, appeared. He walked slowly, as if the explosion did not bother him at all. He was looking at the buildings in our street. When it came to our door he tried to open it. When he failed, he started kicking it. Dusko quickly came down and let him into the building.

When Dusko led Jovan into the dining room, I saw that Jovan was drunk. Not drunk enough to stumble when walking or falter in his speech but his eyes were glassy. He said he saw a yellow object at the window on the third floor and that it could be a tool for signaling the enemies. Then he asked if a jurist, Vesna was a resident from the third floor, and when we confirmed she was, he ordered that we should bring her out of the basement. Mujo went to get Vesna. While we waited, Jovan told us that during his time in Vukovar it had been established, on some occasion, that an old man had signaled Ustashas. [6] He was promptly executed.

When Mujo arrived together with frightened Vesna, Jovan asked about the yellow object in her window, whether it was a signal for *Balijas*, [7] and ordered her to follow him to the apartment. Vesna opposed the idea by saying that she was a Serb and that

there was no reason for her to give signals to *Balijas*.

'If you were a real Serb you would not be sticking here with *Balijas* in the basement', Jovan had yelled at her and asked her to come with him to the third floor. Then Dusko said that he would go with them. Jovan got angry at hearing this, so he started yelling and ordering that we should all sit down but he was the only one who did. He said that he could kill us all. It would be enough to say to his commanding officers that we were spying on them and sending signals to *Balije*. Then he suddenly pulled Vesna, who was standing at his right, onto his lap. Vesna struggled and tried to rise to her feet. Jovan held her tight with his right hand and he lifted his Kalashnikov rifle over his head with his left hand and shouted:

I will kill you all!

Who are you going to kill? – Dusko shouted back. – Give me that damn rifle!

Dusko tried to snatch the Kalashnikov but Jovo pulled it closer to his body,

Vesna broke loose, the Kalashnikov fired. The explosion left me deafened and blinded. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was the body without the upper part of the head. Parts of it and the brains were scattered across the room, covering me and the ceiling, so I when I saw it, I got sick.

Written and signed by

Diki Dedic

Dusko Srdojević, Forestry Engineer, born in Donje Savare, Trebinje, on the 23rd of December 1947, warned to tell the truth, I hereby state:

Some soldiers came to our building this morning. Soldier Jovan Murirovic who was already drunk was among them. He had two more drinks in our basement. When inspecting the apartments, he touched the buttocks of our neighbor, Vesna Zgodnic.

At the sunset, soldier Murirovic came to our building again. He claimed that someone was signaling from the third floor of our building. He was completely drunk. He forced Vesna to sit on his lap. Actor Diki and neighbor Mujo were in the room too. Soldier Murirovic pointed his Kalashnikov at us, saying he would kill us all. He would have probably done it, if I had not grabbed his Kalashnikov by the barrel in an attempt to point it to sideway. He pulled the rifle toward him and the Kalashnikov fired.

The bullet shattered his head.

Once the situation calms down, I will hand out the weapon and documents of the killed soldier that I am keeping with me for now.

Eng. Dusko Srdojevic

In Sarajevo, 2 May 1992

I, Muhamed Husic – Mujo, born in Sarajevo on the 20th of May, 1962, hereby

responsibly certify the following:

When soldier Jovan Murirovic came to our building, I, together with Diki Dedic, was in the apartment of Milentija Jovanovic. Soldier Murirović came along with our neighbor Dusko. Murirovic ordered me to bring lawyer Vesna from the basement, so I did. I think the soldier was under the influence of alcohol. I did not take part in an argument that ensued between Dusko and soldier Murirovic. When the Kalashnikov fired, I was looking through the window and I did not exactly see what happened. I feel sorry that the soldier died.

Mujo Husic

I, Marija Drivinić, born in Olovo, on the 22nd of February 1930, warned not to lie because I can be sentenced, hereby declare:

I do not know anything about the way the soldier was killed in our building.

I saw him in the basement this morning when he came with another four soldiers. He drank two cognacs, and I think he had been drinking too before his arrival to our building. Ms. Vesna told me this morning that he had made some comments about her and tried to sneak in some gropes.

We were in the basement preparing dinner together. Around half past six

I invited, by that children's telephone, our men from the first floor.

I wanted to tell them that one of them should come in to get the dinner before dark would set in. Dusko answered the phone. He told me to come to the apartment of the Jovanovics' immediately. There I found Vesna, Dusko and Mujo. They told me what happened and showed me the deceased soldier. I am a retired nurse who had worked in the Trauma intensive care department. I've seen a lot of injuries from firearms. When a bullet enters the body it usually makes a small hole, and if it passes through the body it makes a big wound at an exit point. But I have never seen anything like what I saw today. Vesna, Dusko and Mujo suggested that, for now, this death should remain unreported. I think that's wise. They asked me to help them around with the dead body. We emptied his pockets, took off the uniform, laid him on the some sheets and towels in order to wrap him in a tent flap. When *rigor mortis* sets in and when our kids are asleep, we will take him to the basement and cover him with charcoal.

I personally wrote and signed the above statement

Marija Drivinic

Rizah Pašalić

Translated By Vedrana Dragoljević

Notes

1. Chetniks were a Serb fascist movement in the Balkans apsiring to create a Greater

Serbia free of the non-Serb population whose members killed and slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Muslims-Bosniaks and Croats in Yugoslavia during World War II and in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1991-1995 war. ↩

2. Grbavica is an area of Sarajevo that was under Serb control until the end of the war in Bosnia. ↩
3. Chetniks normally grew long beards as a sign of recognition. ↩
4. Vukovar is a town in Eastern Croatia that was heavily damaged during the war in Croatia. ↩
5. Vojvodina is an autonomous province of Serbia. ↩
6. Ustashas were Croatian pro-fascist organization, officially active between 1929-1945, that killed hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, and Roma in Yugoslavia during World War II. ↩
7. Balija–a pejorative for Bosniaks-Muslims. ↩

The preceding text is copyright of the author and/or translator and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.