

THE WARRIOR – an adventurer and general

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This is a true story about the life of Croatian Army general, Ante Gotovina

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Flight

Around Easter of 1971, Ante and his friend Srecko were finally ready to go. The escape had been planned down to the smallest detail. For months now, they had worked on the ship, shoveling and loading sand. Even though he wasn't yet sixteen, Ante performed this difficult task with the energy of a grown man. He needed money and he intended to earn it. Nothing could deter him: not the lack of air in the hull on humid, hot days, or the freezing water he stood in from morning to night, or the deadly exhaustion he felt each night. The world he had dreamed about lay before his eyes, America most of all! The land full of adventures and vast as the sea!

Night fell softly on the Pakostan harbor, moonless and starless. The *bura* (note: a ferocious wind off the Velebit mountains which often reaches 200 kilometers per hour) started to blow. This is what the boys had been waiting for. A fine *bura*. One could only escape under cover of the *bura*; it was the wind of freedom, it carried you into the world, and if something went wrong, you could somehow make it to Italy. The maestral and south winds carried you back home; they were like policemen. If it's not your lucky day, they get a hold of you and ruin your plans.

As they were appropriating the small boat in which they had several days before hidden a barrel of water, dried ribs and prosciutto, sardines, dried squid, and bread wrapped in nylon, Ante thought back about how they had imprisoned his father just before he had

been born. He also had tried to escape over the sea. With a few friends and Ante's mother, who had been pregnant at the time. They were caught near the Kornati islands one cool fall night, just as they were preparing to ride the *bura* to Italy. They released his mother, and his father served a few months in prison. After that he never tried to escape again, perhaps because of the accident which struck the family. They lived then in Tkon on Pasma.

His mother had been kneading dough for bread that morning, and Ante, who was not yet four years old, was getting bored. Maybe because his mother was giving more attention to his younger brother, Boris, and his even younger sister, Anica. About a hundred meters from the shoreline, a water cistern was being built, and the workers were mining the rocks and calling out "mines, mines!" This was a warning for people to take cover, that an explosion was following. And that morning, their cries got Ante's attention.

All of a sudden he disappeared from the kitchen and moved in the direction of the voices. His mother did not immediately realize this, but as soon as she saw that the little boy was gone, she ran outside. She was horrified when she saw him running toward the building site. She succeeded in catching up to him, grabbing him, and throwing him under her. At that moment, a mine exploded and one of the large rocks hit her directly in the head. She fell into a deep coma and died that night.

People pulled Ante out from under his mother's half dead body. He was unhurt, but almost blue from her weight which had pressed upon him. His father subsequently went

to work in Zagreb, and grandfather Sime took the boy in with him in Pakostan. When children later asked him about his mother, he would only say that she was his dearest mother who was in heaven, that she loved them and prayed for them. In time they understood that it was better to keep quiet about the accident.

Pakostan was already sleeping that night when they neared Zuta, the first large island heading out to the open seas. If you sailed here on a nice day, it seemed as though there was no sea, but that you went from one tranquil lake to a second, a third, and a fourth. There were so many islands, islets, and cliffs. But in bad weather, and especially if it was a cold night, this gift of nature turned into a cruel trap, a space where the sea and wind beat against each another as though locked in a huge room.

The *bura* began to blow harder, and you could no longer see your finger in front of your nose, so the fugitives decided to seek refuge in the first bay they came across and wait for the dawn. Then they would continue on toward Velika Proversa, a narrow canal dividing Kornat from Katina. This huge stone mass on the right almost touched Dugi Otok and here created the Mala Proversa, a somewhat wider canal which presented a danger to many lighthouses and was blessed with an emerald sea. From here, you can clearly see Sestrice and feel the breath of the sea's surface. And from this point, you can ride the *bura* to Italy.

When dawn broke, the fine *bura* was gone. It had been a dangerous and powerful wind which gusted up to more than forty knots. bofora Ante and Srecko didn't know what to

do. The fire of escape was still burning within them, but the experience they had gained as fishermen warned them of the danger. But neither of them had the courage to say “Let’s give it up!”

In conspiratorial silence, they sailed into the Sitski canal in order to catch the inevitable Proversa. But then the sea began to roil. The *bura* hit like a flying cudgel, raising and whipping up seafoam. They could hardly breathe trying to protect their heads from the cold and piercing spray, but they were hit no matter what they did. The cold penetrated into their bones, and their hands were tingling from gripping the boat so tightly. Ante was the more experienced and therefore held the rudder, fighting with the sea as though it were a wild horse. The sense of adventure was still alive in him, but was offering less and less resistance.

“If we don’t crash against the cliff, then we’ll drown” he thought to himself. Srecko was pale, scared, and wet. When the wind died down for a moment, their fear and disquiet reached a peak, because after that followed a new onslaught, perhaps even more powerful, fateful. It was as though the *bura* had taken a running start, continually changing direction, finding a way to transform the sea into a hellish nothingness.

At the last moment, they came upon a sheltered cove on the island of Glamoc. They put down anchor and tied the boat to the rocks. They were silent, not even realizing how lucky they were to have survived. The wounds of failure burned more deeply. Finally Srecko managed to say “you can’t fight nature”. “No, you can’t”, Ante answered, and

felt completely powerless and miserable. Then, as though comforting himself, he added: “We didn’t prepare well enough, that’s the lesson!”

Was fear victorious over adventure? Ante had no answer at that time. It was true that he had been afraid, but he was more afraid of something else. The *bura* had been so powerful and unpredictable that he had begun to lose control over the situation, and this stood in contradiction to his belief that it was natural for him to always be able to control every situation in some way, to maintain his orientation. He had an eye for evaluating every detail which was important for getting his bearings, and sometimes it seemed to him that he would not lose his way even in a large, unknown city. And here he had almost gotten lost ten miles from home, not mastering the sea he had dreamt about for so many years.

And under these conditions – when the sea determined where he had to go and when he could raise the sails and set out – would the naval police have caught him more easily? And then what would have happened? Would he have ended up in a juvenile detention home? Would that have been the end of all his dreams about the immense and tempting world which awaited him? He couldn’t imagine such a development! It would have been worse than death to blow a second chance.

They waited for the *bura* to die down for two days and two nights. They had enough food and drink and apparently enough luck. But they spoke very little. Ante killed time by calling forth images and character’s from Homer’s “Odyssey” and “Iliad”. Those

were his favorite works and he read them with enthusiasm, imagining that he was either the brave and capable Achilles or Odysseus, who after years of wandering returns into the arms of his Penelope. The bitterness of failure did not affect his desire to go out into the world. In fact, he was even more certain than ever that he would go and that he would ultimately succeed.

“I just have to prepare better”, he repeated as he fell into a deep sleep. Sometimes he would recall days spent without his father in the company of his grandfather, Sime, his mare Micke, and the cart that he so loved to hitch up for a ride. “Oh, Micke was so pretty”, he said to himself, especially when she shed her coat and took on a color that accentuated her muscular body...and her big, dark eyes that expressed so much innocence and faith. He almost teared up at the memory of her nudging him on the back with her head so that he would give her some hay. And then when he would go to her and look into her eyes, she would turn her head towards him, as though asking him to give her a kiss on the face. Which he did on a regular basis.

But otherwise he felt no particular nostalgia for those days. He was focussed with all his soul on going forward, looking toward the future. He longed for what was yet to come. He felt, based on some internal logic, that he could not fail, that this path was just as inevitable as life and death.

When the sea calmed down, and the raw cliffs took on the forms of little islands once more, the two adventurers quietly sailed out of the cove as they had done three nights

previously. Only now their goal was not the sea, but the little Pakostan harbor. On the way, they agreed not to tell anyone what had really happened, but to say that they had gone fishing and gotten caught by bad weather, but were now, thank God, safe and healthy, home again. And that's how it went. As they sailed in, they threw out all their provisions and anything else that could have raised suspicions about the veracity of their story.

Ante's father listened to him, at one time making a face as though he doubted what he was being told, but he didn't say or ask anything. Grandpa Sime didn't get involved in this adventure, either. Ante continued on to the first level of electro-technical school in Zadar, more convinced than ever that he would do it all again. Nothing had changed his longing for the wider world and adventure.

The sea would continue to awaken within him a strange feeling of freedom, would call on him to liberate himself from his invisible restraints and forge out into the vast world. The only thing new is that he had now experienced himself the fact that unless you were equal to the sea, unless you had prepared properly, it could become dangerous and cruel. Just like the Sitsk canal.

Finally out to sea

Miro Gotovina was a fisherman in Tkon. He lived hard and worked hard, but he was very strong and tough. He was of medium height, and, though he appeared thin and

bony, was actually very tough and had a lot of endurance. During that time, this was a gift from God. Some types surrender to hardship and a life of poverty. When the first war came (1941) and the Italians occupied Zadar, Miro joined the Partisans. He fought most around the area of Primorje and Gorski Kotar. One spring morning he was wounded there, taken prisoner, and finally sent to an Ustashi camp in Zagreb, a brick factory in Crnomerec. He lost a lot of blood on the way, and then consciousness. When they saw him like that, they declared him dead. The news reached Tkon, and the death knells sounded from the local church to give peace to his soul. But some doctor, for some unknown reason, took another look at this unfortunate corpse, concluded that he was still breathing, and thus Miro survived and later returned home to Tkon, continuing to fish as though nothing had happened.

With his son Milan he often went to Biograd and Pakostan where they sold their fish. It was a difficult and pitiful wage. Even those living from the land had no money. There was no tourism, so they lived from their barren acres and the sea, without refrigeration and asphalt. Everyone was happiest when they were able to bargain for something.

One warm morning Milan met Ana at a Pakostan fish market. Ana was the daughter of Sime Mijoceva, a man who was everything a man could be at that time. During the first, pre-war Yugoslavia, he was a gendarme, and when he returned to Pakostan he was just as powerful, a fisherman, a sort of local judge, a clerk, and a man of respect everyone who was anyone went to see at his home in Zadar. People held him in high esteem, because he helped many, but they also feared him because he dressed and acted very elegantly for

these times. He was always clean, well-groomed, and always managed to succeed in every endeavor.

When Milan set eyes on Ana, he was certain that she was the one for him. She was only one of Mijocev's seven daughters, which probably facilitated her ending up soon thereafter under Milan's roof in Tkon. They lived cramped together for several years, deeply in love, and she bore him a son, Ante, and later the other children. Then the terrible mine accident forced their lives into a different direction. Milan left to work in Zagreb, and Ante grew up with his grandfather Sime in Pakostan, reading about Columbus and daydreaming about the strange journeys of the Santa Maria, Pinta, and Nina.

When Ante returned from the sea that April afternoon with Srecko, his father Milan didn't ask or verify anything. He knew his son and he knew that this wouldn't be the end of it. He was afraid that his boy could get caught in a new *bura* or end up in prison like him and his father. But since he had returned from Zagreb, he had sold the house in Tkon, which was close to Mijocev's in Pakostan, had built a quite large and respectable house, and settled things quite well with the family. Milan married Aunt Milka, one of Ana's sisters, who bore him two more children; he didn't want any more misfortune.

"Ante", he said one day, "it seems to me that you need a passport". He added that he thought he could get him one, although his son was not yet of age. Ante nodded his head,

not showing overt appreciation or happiness. He held himself as though he deserved this service, as though Fate had decreed it and this was his destiny.

At the end of May, he and Srecko both had passports. For Srecko it was not so unusual, as he was older, already eighteen. His friend, however, never figured out how Ante had managed to obtain this magical key to the world. But he didn't waste too much time pondering over it, either.

They traveled to Trieste with the dollars they had left over from the first escape attempt, and from there to Austria and Munich. When they arrived in Bavaria, they went to a Croatian priest, knocked on the door and said: "We would like a job". The priest, who was the head of the then Croatian mission, looked at them as though they had fallen from Mars, but nonetheless invited them in. He gave them something to eat and drink and then, with a stern and serious demeanor, told them there was no work in Germany, especially for two boys, and that it would be better for them to return home.

When they found themselves once again at the Munich train station, they had an irresistible impulse to buy tickets for Zurich. But they never got there. In the border town of Buchs, they were removed from the train by a Swiss policeman, taken to a small and unpretentious area, interrogated for one or two hours, and then settled into a little hotel nearby. The next morning they were on the train again, but this time heading for Maribor. There the Yugoslav police was waiting for them and they were immediately put into prison. But only until the arrival of a homely and overweight creature in uniform

who reeked of alcohol, burped from time to time, and constantly hiked up his pants between his legs. “Where were you running to, you little troublemakers, ha?” he said threateningly. “Nowhere”, Ante answered. “We were going to Switzerland to visit relatives and work for awhile.” This was said calmly and reasonably, as though he was giving an order. The militiaman was confused for a moment, and didn’t know what to say to this youngster. He just stared at him and then, as though he had just come to his senses, said, “Oh yeah?” Two hours later they were on a bus to Zadar.

This second failure depressed Srecko terribly, so he decided not to try it a third time. Ante accepted this, but it did not affect him at all. “Fine”, he said, “we’ll each go our own way.” So preparations began even more intensively for the final departure.

If it was a good year, that also meant that the peaches in grandpa Sime’s orchard were good. Ante went often with him to Vransko Lake where they had fields and fruit orchards. Grandpa was especially proud of his peaches, to which he devoted great care. He especially enjoyed their aroma when they ripened. Sometimes it seemed to his grandson that the entire lake exuded their aroma. But this summer, the young boy had no time for grandpa’s peaches. He had found work on an old sailboat called Miki, ferrying around the tourists who had begun to arrive again on the Adriatic. He did all that was asked of him, earned a considerable sum of money, and experienced his first love.

She was a Belgian whom he still remembered many years afterward. Her name was Martina Dayse; she had been perhaps two years older than he, had brown hair, and was

beautiful and fiery. He spent twenty days with her, mostly hiding from his uncle and her parents, but in any case long enough to learn that some fires burn more brightly the more you try to extinguish them.

Meanwhile, one of his friends made a connection with a shipping line, Topic, whose ships sailed under a Liberian flag and which were headquartered in Monaco, in Monte Carlo. At the end of August, a telegram arrived in Pakostan informing him that a sailor's position was waiting for him on the Jela Topic - a monster of 27,000 tons, longer than 200 meters - which carried various cargo, especially wheat. He was told to report to Bordeaux in September for boarding.

Since he had a passport and knew that in Genoa he could obtain the necessary sailing papers, Ante took off immediately from Pakostan. He said his farewells discreetly to his father, fearing that something might come up at the last minute. He was only a heartbeat away from realizing his dream.

When he disembarked from the train at the Bordeaux station in late September, the Atlantic ocean and the city were both cloaked in fog. A weak rain was also falling, and the air smelled foreign. He made his way slowly down to the harbor, inspecting the docks as though he were on a school field trip. He saw for the first time the huge, transatlantic ships and was thrilled by them all. Warm chills went through him from the dreams they awakened in him. He was not bothered by the bad weather or the uncertainty. He felt like a man who, after many years spent in the mountains, had come

down below and was confronted with a huge marketplace. Everything seemed so shiny and colorful to him, in spite of the heavy fog. After an hour and a half, he found the Jela Topic. The ship was a true tanker, gray like the foggy day, but also with an immense shiny white command post and cabin.

He was given a small, but clean and fairly attractive cabin with portholes which, during rough and stormy seas, were so far below water level that he sometimes felt he would never surface again. At these moments, he felt unease, even fear, which was intensified by the eerie squeaking of the boat. It was as though it were too tight for its iron shell, it squeaked and screeched, then plunged into the depths and, when you least expected it, surfaced out of sheer spite.

He was the youngest of 27 crew members, all of whom were his countrymen. He did all the jobs given to a regular sailor, listened to tales about the wide world and its wonders, went out onto the deck at nights and stared at the wake the ship left in the sea. He couldn't get enough of the infiniteness, the darkness which seemed to intentionally hide its immensity, though he knew that soon he would be confronted with it. Listening to the shrieks created by the roar of the sea and din of the motor, he turned his eyes away from the starry sky so strange and far away, the sky from which his mother was perhaps at that very moment watching over him. When he became exhausted by this beauty, he returned to his cabin where his Kipling was waiting for him. He knew by heart all the stories, all of which awakened in him a hunger for adventure, action, honor, bravery, and accomplishment.

The sea summoned within him the eternal adventurer and dreamer, but failed to totally seduce him.

America!

Only those in love with the sea know what land means. Thus the sailors looked forward to it as much as to women. After many exhausting and colorless days, seeing this dark silhouette made them feel as though they had been born again.

When the Jela Topic neared Houston, the sight of land also meant America to Ante. The country he felt he had come to know a bit, having dreamed of it so many times. It was as vast to him as the skies were to a bird. Even though the shape of the continent could hardly be discerned from the horizon, he was not discouraged. He had reached his goal!

The Jela Topic slowly sailed into port. The nearest city was about twenty miles away. All along the way there were various bars and restaurants, most of which catered to sailors. It was all so colorful, and so were the men and women. Mexico was not far away, and one could almost feel it with every step.

Ante decided first to go into town alone. He loved this type of aloneness. Whenever he experienced something unknown and new, he was most comfortable confronting it alone. He was born with the habits of a wolf. He felt that only in this way could he become

acquainted with his environment and reach accurate decisions about it. He took money and a knife with him. Like all sailors he had a switchblade that was attached from inside his pants to his belt. He put his money into his left shirt pocket, but not all of it. The rest he wrapped in a sock he had sewn especially for this purpose and attached it right beneath his knee. If they attacked him and stole the money from his pocket, he reasoned, he would at least still have the money under his knee. This is what he did later as well and he was never left without money, except when he spent it all himself, and that was not seldom.

He took a taxi into town. As attractive as the sailor bars were to him, he resisted the aura of adventure and freedom he sensed in the air and decided to take a look at Houston first. It was after all the biggest city he had ever seen. The largest so far had been Zagreb, where he had lived for a short time with his father and gone to the Hrambasic school, and then Munich.

The taxi took him to the center of town. When he got out of the car, his head was literally swimming at the size of the skyscrapers. He had never seen so many tall buildings and so much concrete. He was immediately taken with the marvels of modern construction! “My God, the world is so big!” he said to himself as he went farther into the inner city. He walked through the streets and markets all day long, using his map to orient himself. He took in deep breaths, as though physically drawing in freedom. But at the same time he experienced certain mixed, strange feelings. The longer he walked through this Texas city, the more disappointed he became. Somehow there was too much

concrete and too many skyscrapers, though this had at first impressed him. He felt as though he was entrapped in a huge concrete box. But he was satisfied overall. Houston was fantastic and at the same time grim. Is this the America he had dreamed of?

After he had tired of walking around, he sat down in a bar. Soon thereafter, some guys from his boat came into the bar where he was sipping his Coca Cola. They invited him to go to a club in downtown Houston where there were hot women strippers, and where men whose races couldn't even be determined due to the large hats they wore pulled down over their heads poured out strong liquor. This was his first striptease and the first time he ever got thrown out into the street. A large elegantly dressed black man with a forbidding face tapped him on the shoulder, and when Ante turned around, he asked him how old he was. Instead of answering, he showed him his identification. When he saw it, the black man grabbed him by the ear and threw him out on the street.

Only a few months later, something like this would have been unthinkable. The "kid" had by then proved himself a true comrade, and the older soldiers respected him. He knew how to listen, didn't talk too much, and knew how to keep quiet when necessary. Somehow it was natural to him that work was work and private life something else. He believed the two should never be mixed; in fact, he advocated building a wall between them. And that is what he did. And how he behaved. He was also strong and capable, especially with the plastic rafts, and this did not pass unobserved. Soon he was transferring huge boxes of cigarettes from the boat onto these rafts and then onto land.

The sailors considered this type of activity normal, and Ante received a piece of the earnings for his efforts.

He also didn't back away from fistfights, though they were usually provoked by others.

The first one was in Genoa, in the renowned Via pre, a narrow street running parallel with the wide avenue dividing the harbor from the other parts of the city. In this fairly long street which wound uphill, there were many bordellos, night bars, pimps and prostitutes, street hustlers, and other social misfits. Here also was the Hawaii Bar, a fairly large bar where sailors from all over the world gathered. All languages were spoken, all kinds of drinks were available, and the girls came in all shapes and sizes. A certain spiteful, thick-set, and ill-tempered sailor from the Jela Topic who spoke very little and smirked a lot, was particularly sensitive that night. Due to the excess of energy he had after weeks at sea, or bad news from home, who knew? In any case, a drunken Englishman or Irishman shoved this bad-tempered Croatian in passing, after which he delivered a roundhouse punch to his head. And then of course a brawl broke out.

In the first few minutes, the Jela Topic sailors fought against the English or Irish, and then everybody got involved. Even women. Chairs flew, ribs cracked, bottles smashed. Even blood flowed. This was Ante's first fistfight. He didn't ask for it, but also didn't avoid it. He took several blows to the head and body before he retreated with his compatriots toward the exit doors. At the exit, he threw a few more punches before sirens could be heard. Everybody dispersed. Two soldiers from the Jela Topic ended up in the hospital instead of on the ship. After he had exited through a side door and

straightened himself up, Ante returned casually to the Via pre, this time all alone, as though nothing at all had happened, as though it had all been completely normal and legal. In a group, just like at sea, solidarity was an unspoken law, sort of like the longing for the world one felt when one was alone.

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Jela Topic was a very modern and, for its category, a very attractive ship. But it had bad luck. It experienced a small accident, which was not really that serious, but it nonetheless had to be put into dry-dock. This was approximately a year after Ante had embarked. The repairs were undertaken at the dock in La Spezia, in Italy. The sailors had plenty of time to spend their money and energy, but Ante mainly wandered around town. On one occasion, he met a nice, somewhat older gentleman in a restaurant, who began talking to him about all sorts of things and whose company he enjoyed very much. He told him about the Foreign Legion, its famous commander, Louis-Philippe, about its famous battles in faraway Mexico near Camerona in 1863, when all the legionnaires, together with their commander, Captain Danjou, died heroically in a battle with the predominant Mexicans, but nonetheless successfully completed their assignment: ensuring a safe retreat of the major forces. Only one legionnaire survived. In a gesture of admiration and respect, he was pardoned by the enemy and given the hand of the dead Captain Danjou, who had been a symbol of the Legion ever since.

He listened and drank everything in; the kind gentleman spoke of it all as though it were a fairy tale, an adventure, imbuing in the young man a love for honor and responsibility. Life on the boat seemed dull prose in comparison with the life of these adventurous soldiers. He had been sailing for a year already, between Europe and America, and had come to know many ports, but it always seemed to him that he still hadn't seen the world. Nothing drew him back home, and on the boat he had begun to feel hemmed in. "If I sail, then I want to sail on a ship where I will be the captain" he told himself in those moments when he opened up his soul. At the same time, he knew how unrealistic this was, that there was no chance of this occurring unless he returned home and continued his studies at some naval school, thereby losing precious time.

"I want to join the Legion, tell me how to get there" he told the kind man one day. And as though he had expected this, he pointed in the direction of Marseille, saying: "It's enough for you to show up at the train station, all the information you can find is there".

Ante returned to the ship and said he had to return home immediately as he had some family problems. The boss took his passport out of the safe and around two thousand dollars in savings, gave them to Ante, and wished him a good trip.

In Genoa he quickly located people who were willing to illegally transport him over the French border, as he was still underage and had a passport that he was sure wouldn't get him very far. He paid about three hundred dollars for this service, and crossed the border over a long tunnel on the way to Courmayeur-Chamonix, crawling along goat paths on

the steep cliffs of Mount Blanc. It was night, just before dawn, when they came out on the French side. He saw the lights of Menthon in the distance. There were six or seven people in the group, but nobody spoke or said where and why they were going.

Ante had his money attached as usual around his left knee, and around his right he had his passport and ship's papers. On his back he carried a small rucksack containing a clean shirt, new shoes, and other items.

When they reached a small meadow stream, he freshened up, changed into his clean shirt, put on his new shoes, and made his way slowly to Menthon. To the train station. There he bought a ticket for Marseille. He was tremendously excited thinking about a new town and a new destiny, one he felt had been written in the stars. He was going out to discover yet another world.

In the old fortress of Marseilles

The train station in Marseille is up on a hill and can only be reached by climbing a big flight of stairs. You go into town the same way, but in the opposite direction. When Ante arrived in Marseille, it was already late afternoon. He was tired, but not too tired to notice at the station the attractive framed posters inviting all interested to join the Foreign Legion. But he just glanced at them in passing. He went down the stairs and into the street, which was teeming with small hotels and *pansions*. He went into the first one that caught his eye (which meant it was cheap) and rented a room, staying in it just long

enough to freshen up. Then he went out to explore the city, towards the opera, which was somewhere near the center. He didn't wander around for too long, even though the evening was very pleasant, but told himself: "Back to bed now, tomorrow you have to get up early and get to work. That's why you are here!"

He took the search for the Legion very seriously and that is why he wanted to be rested, orderly, organized; in a word, prepared. Not only because it seemed to him that a future professional soldier of the most elite French unit should present himself in this manner, but because he had somehow sensed that a great and significant page in his life was being turned. All he had done and experienced thus far seemed banal compared to what he was now embarking upon. Actually, he had had no clear proof of this, but was sure it was the case.

Thus he did not contact the little French girl he had met on the train to Marseille, who had left him her phone number, saying: "If you stay for awhile in my town, give me a call!" Even though all women were attractive in their way to Ante, this one especially appealed to him because she reminded him of an angel with her long, brown, curly hair and big eyes. But work took precedence.

The entire train station was full of posters encouraging people to join the Legion. They were designed very professionally, framed, not too large, but pasted up everywhere. They explained the Legion in all languages; they listed the phone number and address of the Legion, and, for those who preferred, the information that they could report to the

first station, where they would be taken care of. Newcomers and the curious saw the strong and suntanned faces of the legionnaires looking down upon them, with the white legionnaire's caps on their heads and their gaze directed off into the distance, toward adventure, it seemed to Ante. And beneath these dominant faces there were all kinds of small photos showing legionnaires throughout the world in the most diverse situations and activities.

He decided to find the nearest recruiting Legion station himself. He was in the old part of Marseille and in the equally old Fort St. Nicholas. When he got into the taxi and told the driver where he wanted to go, the driver – a smiling Arab – looked at him both with astonishment and sympathy. Ante repeated the address, more to himself as reassurance that he had understood correctly. He just wanted a little good luck.

At the entrance to the base were heavy, wooden doors, the likes of which the sailor from the Jela Topic had only seen in movies. He rang the large bell on the wall, waiting a few moments, and then the big doors opened. A young man in uniform appeared, serious and solemn, with a legionnaire's haircut, short and even, and a green beret on his head. He asked what Ante wanted, and when the newcomer explained what had been obvious already to the young man, he took his passport, brought him into the foyer, and ordered him to wait.

As he stood near the guard post, leaning against the wall, he noticed some unusual creatures moving around the courtyard. They looked like they were sweeping, but in any

case it was as though they were from another world. On their heads they had huge, actually too large, black berets, and wore similar clumsy pants and military shirts. They resembled circus performers more than soldiers. Their solemnity and movements gave the scene a surrealistic quality. This impression was enhanced considerably by two military police who appeared after ten minutes in perfectly appointed military uniforms.

The military police escorted Ante to a nearby office where he was received by an officer of the Legion, a young man of determined appearance, abrupt in movement and speech. “A true professional” Ante thought. “Even his initial, barely noticeable smile was somehow taut and controlled.”

But Ante was unable to adequately explain why he had come, so the other left him to wait for the next two hours until another middle-aged man with gray hair and a dark look on his face appeared. He too was athletically built and well-groomed, and started out by asking Ante, in “Serbo-Croatian”: “Who sent you? Why have you come? How old are you? Do you have problems? Is somebody looking for you?”

Ante answered all the questions calmly, and when it came to the question about his age, he said: “You have my passport.” The man, who by his accent could have been from Bosnia, recorded everything on a form and then put down his pencil and said: “You’ll stay here now, you are forbidden to go out, we will take from you all your personal belongings and civilian clothes, and leave you only your money, but we have to know how much you have. If all goes well, you will be going to a recruiting center in a few

days.” The adventurer nodded his head, disguising his joy that he would soon be a legionnaire.

But things weren't so simple. Actually, he did get the weird uniform and clumsy black beret right there in the office. He changed his clothes there, too, and they took from him his civilian clothes. When he had changed, the Bosnian noticed that he had a sock tied around his knee and smiled, saying: “You learn from life, you learn...”. He added: “You are quite strong, do you play any sports?” “No,” Ante answered, “that's from fishing and hard labor”. And then he immediately added: “I'd like to go into diving.” “Take it easy, there's plenty of time,” said the Bosnian.

He also told him that it was not mandatory at that time to cut his hair, that there was still time for him to change his mind, and that he could return home any time before entering the official recruiting station. “And meanwhile, we will check to see whether you have any problems with the law.” Then he made a list of all Ante's belongings – knife, golden chain with cross, watch, shoes, socks...every little piece of paper, every item. Ante signed the list verifying that it was accurate and said he had no further questions.

He spent the night in a sleeping dorm on the first floor which held twenty people. The beds were bunkbeds, and they gave him two rough, dark green blankets and a long, round pillow under which was a white, stiff cover that served as a sheet. He slept inside this cover, without pajamas, clad only in his underwear and bare to the waist. There were twenty boys in the room that night, two blacks, several Arabs, and the rest Caucasian.

They barely spoke to one another, kept to themselves, like diverse animals which had come to drink from the same water source.

When they woke up, it was rainy and cold (it was the end of October). After breakfast, Ante ended up in the kitchen peeling potatoes until afternoon, waiting impatiently for the “real work” to finally begin. He thought of nothing else. Not even of his people in Pakostan who had no idea where he had gone. He had told them nothing, because he believed that whatever happened to him was no longer their concern. He was responsible for his own life and it would not have been appropriate for him to burden others with it. Especially since “home was another world” in comparison with the world in which he now found himself.

Even though he worked all day cleaning windows and bathrooms and sweeping the yard, he was tremendously bored. It was as though time had stopped. Nobody came, nobody spoke to them. The only thing he noticed was that they were under constant surveillance by the military police, as though they were being filmed. The worst part was that some of the guys in the black berets left and others came, but nobody knew where they went and why. This lasted almost a month. He started to lose hope, saw no purpose in what appeared to him to be a complete waste of time. And it became colder and colder.

Then one morning, after they had been called to order, the Bosnian appeared in the company of a higher officer, the commander of the military police (Security Office), which was part of the First Corps of the Foreign Legion, with its headquarters in

Aubagne, a city between Marseille and Toulon. Those who had survived the first test of boredom and uncertainty were called forward and ordered to stand to the right. Then they were asked the question: “Have you changed your mind?” If the answer was negative, and it usually was, they were then told: “Then you’re continuing on.” All those who continued on, and Ante was among them, got into a truck. After an hour and a half, they got out and saw that they had arrived at a place that was drastically different than Fort St. Nicholas.

150,408, at your command!!!

In the Aubagne barracks, everything went at high speed. The yard and polygon were full of legionnaires in dress uniforms, with white caps on their heads, red epaulets which fell like thick strands of hair over their shoulders, and blue braided belts. All were spit-shined with heads shaved down to a few millimeters. Only the hair on the top of their heads was allowed to be kept a bit longer. All were clean and meticulously groomed. Only the engineers wore beards, which was not only a tradition but a requirement.

In the circle and on the polygons work and battle uniforms could be seen, and you could hear brusque orders being issued. It all created the impression of an action film whose plot the uninformed newcomer was unable to comprehend.

The novices were called to order by blows to the ribs, and those who had trouble orienting themselves got a kick in the behind. Part of the tedious formalities were

repeated, from the regulations to undressing and donning of the uniform, which was identical to that in Fort St. Nicholas. Then came the medical examinations, intelligence tests, education level, physicals, and psychological testing. This all lasted days, and the worst were the psychological tests. They plumbed the very depths of the human being.

“Have you ever touched young boys or, later, men?” the psychologist asked Ante. “You had a sister, Ante, didn’t you? Tell me, how did you act towards her...And later?” Then came the photographs. On one there were a deranged man and a woman beating a helpless, screaming child. “How do you like this? What do you think about this?” “Terrible”, Ante answered. And then they would stick in front of his nose a picture of a strangled dog hanging from a wire. “And this?” “That’s disgusting, I would never do such a thing to an animal” he answered quickly to avoid looking at the photo any longer than necessary.

These psycho-tests lasted quite awhile. Sometimes the psychologists would ask him to study a photograph for a long time and then record his reactions. Once Ante was forced to stare at a photograph of a massacred man who had been lynched by a mob somewhere in Asia. The sight was horrendous to him and instead of describing how he felt, he blurted out in protest: “That’s not fair for a mob to attack one man, that’s unjust.”

When all this was over, some people from the Security Office arrived, who interrogated him for almost a week about everything that had happened thus far in his life. “Have you ever stolen anything? Have you gotten into fights? How did that make you feel? Did you

belong to any street gangs, any criminal bands, have you participated in any racketeering? How did you feel when your mother died? What did you do on the boat? Have you told anyone you were going into the Legion?” “No, I didn’t tell anyone” he answered to the last question. “Are you sure?” “Yes”, he repeated. “Good, then have you ever tried drugs or regularly drunk alcohol?” Ante answered in the negative, though he added that he had gotten drunk a few times, but that he was disgusted by alcohol and did not indulge at all.

Everything he did and answered was assiduously recorded and filed in his dossier which was to follow him around like a shadow. His entire life was printed in a file which was analyzed, classified, and evaluated. The only thing left was to be given a new identity and to sign the contract.

This day came at the beginning of 1973. After spending a month in Fort St. Nicholas and in the administrative center of the First corps of the Foreign Legion in Aubagne, he passed his tests and signed the contract to join the Legion. He received a new name, and from that time forward was “Andrija Grabovac, born December 10, 1953, in Grabovac, Yugoslavia.” With this, he became two years older and, instead of a Libra (he was really born October 12, 1955), became a Sagittarius.

But the most important thing about the contract was the number he received: 151408. From this point on, he ceased being a person and became this number. Whenever he would identify himself or salute, the only thing he was allowed to say was “151408, at

your command!” He was to say it as though it were a bullet shooting out the barrel of a gun. This is the only way the new legionnaire was permitted to present himself. And he was prohibited from looking his superiors in the eye, as this was considered rude. He was to stand quietly at a distance of approximately three meters, speak out his identification number, and look at his officer at a point somewhere above the eyebrows. He was also not permitted to look at the ground.

Of the 120 candidates, only 37 were admitted into the special center for basic instruction. Before they left Aubagne, they were examined carefully once more, but this time, every mark on their bodies, every mole or scar, was recorded so that they could later be identified if necessary. Only then did they become recruits and only then were they allowed to discard the surreal uniforms and awkward black berets. They were issued green berets, the caps worn by legionnaires in battle or on assignment, but without any markings, as they were not yet true legionnaires. They had not yet taken the oath.

Bonifacio was a city on the southern coast of Corsica. The passage between this French island and Sardinia carries the same name, and the Legion center for basic instruction is located in Bonifacio. Only upon arrival here do you become a recruit; complete equipment is issued: all types of uniforms, semi-automatic weapons, knives, and so forth. The instruction lasts four months and is extremely demanding. Many are unable to finish, so the recruits are under constant observation.

Every four hours the instructor changed. The recruits were required to exhibit their skills automatically; eyes bound and in the dark, they had to quickly disassemble and assemble the most complicated weapons so that they could learn to maintain composure under a volley of real bullets. In such a situation, there was no mercy, no generosity. Blows rained from all sides, and discipline and order had to be at the highest level, even to the orderliness of one's footlocker.

One of the instructors in Bonifacio was a German. A man of dangerous and frightening appearance. He had blue eyes as cold as ice, never showed emotion or sympathy, and was flawlessly appointed and well-groomed. The recruits trembled in his presence. When they looked at him, they had the feeling that a dangerous coldness was flowing through him.

And on the other hand, it was said that he was a real soldier, a real reflection of the Foreign Legionnaire, an example to all, a true professional. Even though he was only five foot nine or so, and was near fifty years old, he gave the impression of being in superb physical condition. Perhaps because he had no neck, his head appeared to grow out from a powerful back, creating the image of a package of flexed muscle. He had small, meaty fists with short and agile fingers. He was phenomenally talented in the use of all possible weapons, possessed excellent reflexes, and was always prepared to deliver an unexpected and devious blow.

Recruits were always as nervous as cats in his presence; those who weren't found themselves on the floor after having received a surprising blow to the stomach. His philosophy was to create from these boys of differing characters – many of them ne'er do wells or hoodlums – lone wolves who could survive under all conditions but who, in a pack, knew how to respect the rules of collective life.

This dangerous German performed exercises with the boys with real ammunition. He shot at them until the dust flew, just above their heads. Some could not endure this and took refuge in a trench. Others tried to dig an even deeper hole with their bare hands to afford themselves more protection. The German just kept on emptying his barrels.

Ante was also in the trench, under a volley of bullets, but he was not afraid. This was just an exercise to him; a game. He was certain that, in spite of the unpleasantness of the shooting, the instructor would not shoot anybody, that he was careful. He therefore didn't take special cover, but peered out of the trench instead, as though he were watching a movie in the theater.

When the German noticed his unusual behavior, he stopped shooting and yelled out: "You over there, come here immediately", pointing at Ante. Ante jumped out and moved towards him. When he came within thirty meters, the German drew his pistol and started shooting as though he were trying to hit him.

All of a sudden, Ante felt a bullet whizzing so close to his right foot that his foot twitched trying to avert the bullet. The German noticed this and shot even closer, but Ante didn't stop. He went straight ahead as though nothing dramatic were occurring. When he came within three meters of the instructor, he stopped, gave his identification number and added: "At your command", looking directly into the German's forehead, above the eyebrows. But the German came to him quickly, took his face, and forced him to look him in the eye. At that moment, Ante felt as though an icy and dangerous current were pulsing throughout his being. This lasted several seconds, and then the German took a step back, ordered that a sniper rifle be given to 150408 and ordered him to hit targets which were about two hundred meters away. These targets were simulated soldiers lying on the ground, with only heads and chests visible.

Ante raised the sniper rifle which contained five bullets, inhaled and exhaled deeply several times, and shot the whole magazine. He hit all the targets! Then he rested the sniper rifle against his leg and said distinctly: "150408, order executed." It took a few more minutes for the German to be given the results of the shootings, and then he called out: "Hey, Bolshevik!" (he called him this as he was from the former Yugoslavia) "come back here!"

Later they added the following to his dossier: "His heartbeat was the same before and after the exercise. Totally composed."

Legionnaire girls for four chits

This was the day the boys in Bonifacio had been waiting for so impatiently. The end of instruction and their swearing in ceremony. After four months of exhausting work and difficult psychological stress, something nice was happening. It was a sunny, warm day, smelling of spring and new life. The recruits were called to order in their dress uniforms. 25 of the 37 had completed the training. In front of each one was a chair upon which rested a white legionnaire's cap, red dress epaulets with the insignia of the Foreign Legion, a red sash worn across the shoulders, and a dark blue, braided belt. Only after the oath was sworn were you allowed to wear the white cap and the other elements of the official uniform. And only then were you a true legionnaire.

Ante repeated the oath as though he were pledging eternal loyalty to a lovesick woman. He was excited, moved, and proud. And when he put the cap on his head, he felt on top of the world, finally able to delve into its many mysteries. He was a professional soldier! In the famous Foreign Legion! What an honor!

For the first time in several months, Ante was able to enjoy a quiet and substantial lunch. There were no surprises, no interruptions to his meal, no stress or brutality. He ate with gusto, especially at the thought of what was to come. That evening.

After dinner, the boys went to shower, put on their sweatsuits, gathered together and, reciting "one-two-three-go for it!" headed for the *bum*. This was the legionnaire's expression for the bordello which had been built within the confines of the barracks and

was officially called the B.M.C. This would be the first time they had access to the “dream kingdom”. Was it some kind of award for all they had endured? Contact with women of the Legion? At any rate, each boy received four chits for girls and four chits for beer. The first four chits were good for twenty minutes with a girl and the beer chits for four beers. Why it was organized this way nobody knew, but later the boys found out that eight chits were good for a whole hour with a girl, and sixteen for almost half the night. But at this time they just paid without questioning anything.

The building in which the prostitutes were to be found was attractive on the outside, and on the inside pleasant, clean, and well-kept. Pictures of the girls in seductive poses hung in the hallway and the boys made their choices based on these pictures. But they couldn't just go into the room where the girls were. There was a doctor in the hallway who made them take off their sweats and show what they had, and if there was nothing suspicious, no signs of disease, they were let inside.

It seemed to Ante that the twenty minutes went past like the blink of an eye. He had no more chits and couldn't purchase more, as these were the rules at Bonifacio. But he still had four chits for beer. He sat down at the B.M.C. bar in the salon, ordered a beer, took a sip, and pulled a face. Alcohol just didn't appeal to him, and beer was worst of all. His grimace, which corresponded exactly to his mood, was noticed by a German named Barens who hadn't yet been with a girl but had drunk his four beers. In a flash, Ante had exchanged his beer chits for the others, gone back to the hallway with the photographs, and made a new choice.

And as far as Barens was concerned, he was just as content to continue drinking beer.

This German later proved himself to be a good warrior, strong as an ox, but a little crazy and lonely. He ultimately succumbed to alcohol and it was later said that he had gone to pieces.

The Foreign Legion took care of everything, and this meant that their warriors always had women. They attempted to ensure, especially in France, that the legionnaires did not come into contact with civilians; every barracks had its bordello accessible to all, under certain rules and regulations, and for a small price. Because after all, no matter how much energy was used on exercises and on assignment, the fire that burned in them could be totally extinguished only by a woman's body. And sometimes simply by their presence, voice, look, or touch.

But this wasn't the only reason the boys in Bonifacio received these chits. After Ante had spent his first four chits and gone to drink a beer, his twenty minute girl took a pencil in hand and filled out a form with her impressions. How had he behaved during these twenty minutes, did he have any problems, did he create any... Everything that fell into the sphere of predicting future behavior and indicating how one acts in completely different areas of life was recorded. And then this form was placed with the dossier which traveled everywhere with Ante, though he knew nothing at all about it.

But other bordellos functioned differently than the one in Bonifacio. They were sort of an institution in the Legion, playing a similar role to that of the prostitutes during the French Revolution (according to some, there would have been no revolution if not for them!). In Calvi, for example, where the barracks consisted of only a few square meters, the bordello was located to the right of the main entrance, behind the administration building, a bit to the side, but still well located and in plain view. The building was very attractive, built in the Mediterranean style after plans drawn up by a Legion architect, and completely surrounded by flowers.

Everything in the building was dark red; only the carpets were blue. Cleanliness and order were the “law”, and the girls (there were usually between nine and fifteen) changed every six months. Behind the entrance hall was a salon to the side with large, dark red leather chairs, a half bar with bar stools, romantic night lamps, and ladies between twenty and thirty five years old. Couches and lounge chairs were also discreetly placed around the area.

There was an older, very charming lady (about fifty years old) who had started her career in Algeria, where the Legion had had its presence since 1840 when the legendary Marshal Bugeaud was in command. She was always dressed elegantly, and though friendly to all, exercised an unquestionable authority. She knew the souls of the legionnaires, because through her salons had passed not only the innocent, but all sorts of thugs, losers, gamblers, cheats, and maybe even murderers. Everyone knew this and all respected the rules enforced by the lady.

The girls in Calvi were a bit more expensive than other places (four chits were about 45 francs) but at that time, in 1973, this was not much, since the basic legionnaire's salary was 2700-4000 francs a month (in the base). Out on the field, the salary could be three times more.

But the general rules applied here as well. The B.M.C. was open only during certain hours, the legionnaire was required to be clean, well-groomed, nails cut, and shoes shined. And the obligatory doctor was always to be found in the hallway, wanting to see "their stuff".

Naval diversionary

After the girls came the *long (legionnaires') march*, and with it, the other side of the coin. The boys got up at four in the morning and in full battle uniform headed from Bonifacio to Corte, an historical city in the interior of the island. The trip was 170 kilometers, they marched in military step, and carried on their backs a rucksack weighing about 25 kilograms. Crossing through mainly uninhabited areas, the newly-minted legionnaires reached their destination in three days.

The city had several thousand residents and was situated in a valley surrounded by not particularly high, but inaccessible, mountains and hills. In summer it was broiling and in winter freezing. It was even worse on the edge of the city, toward the rock quarries in the

mountains where the *disciplinary sector* was to be found. This was the Foreign Legion's prison.

It rested on an area the approximate size of three football fields, surrounded by a wall and barbed wire. Guard and surveillance posts could be seen from the outside, similar to those seen in war films, with specially equipped military police. In addition to the surveillance posts, there were also wooden barracks in which the prisoners slept, mostly in isolation cells. The walls of these cells were of rough concrete, and the cell itself was about a meter by a meter and a half. Constructed so that the prisoner could not stretch out in any direction except in a standing position. There were no windows, and they were fed bread and water twice a day.

In the Legion there were all sorts of people, from the criminally inclined to the rare psychopath. But there were also plenty of "normal" men who had committed some serious disciplinary infraction and had ended up in the prison in Corte. One of the most serious infractions was escaping from the Legion. And there were a lot of escapes, as many were unable to endure the iron discipline, rawness, and difficulties of the legionnaire's life.

When you ended up in the *disciplinary sector*, it was like arriving in hell. There were no rights and no words; only blows, hard labor, and punishment. Here you weren't even a number.

The prisoners were forced to perform hard labor in the rock quarries, where everything was done manually without machinery and mines. The huge rock cliffs were broken apart, pulverized, and transported to the markets, where buyers had no idea how much sweat and blood had flowed for it.

An American university professor who was impressed with the Foreign Legion wrote a large tome about it, and in it gave an illustration of what awaited a deserter of the Legion. This was actually provided by a poster the League of Nations had used between the two World Wars to rally support for opposition to the Foreign Legion due to its militarism and draconian punishments.

In the foreground was a legionnaire with a gun in his hand, looking at a prisoner who is lying in the dirt on his stomach with his hands and legs tied, as though he were a wild animal. He regards him with loathing and disgust, and it seems as though he might begin to kick or bludgeon him at any moment. In the background are two others who are beating some poor soul with a whip, but he, unlike the other, is lying on his back on a table about a half meter high so that the blows are more effective.

When the boys from Bonifacio marched up to the prison in Corte, they did not enter. The instructors showed it to them, saying “that’s that.” Only later did some of them learn that the most recalcitrant and unrehabilitable were doused with cold water in winter and in the summer, during the worst heat, received it only by special order. And that many did not survive: some lost their souls, some their bodies, and others both. But few felt sorry for

them. The general thought was that all had basically received what they deserved and that there were only a few who had simply had bad luck.

The prison in Corte was not the final destination of the *long march*. The boys turned around and marched off in the opposite direction of the city toward the barracks there. There they remained about a week before trucks came for them and took them away. Ante, along with four others (a Belgian, Portuguese, Spaniard, and Pole) were dispatched to the most elite corps of the Foreign Legion, the 2. R.E.P. (the foreign parachutist regiment). It was the parachute diversionary corps, the indispensable Quick Reaction Forces, whose members would later participate in Desert Storm, but also in operations in Bosnia and Kosovo.

The Legion itself was a typical ground force comprised of all types and divided into regiments or corps. There were usually between 7-8,000 soldiers, and the first regiments were those who were usually sent into the fire. In the elite 2.R.E.P., Ante was the youngest legionnaire. He was not yet eighteen years old.

The parachute-diversionary corps base was located on the west coast of Corsica, in a real Mediterranean city, Calvi, which had around 4,000 inhabitants. Calvi was a tourist mecca in a beautiful bay with sand beaches, and on the right side, a castle dominated the view. Locals claimed that Columbus had been born there and not in Genoa. Today there is an officer's club and recreation area in the castle, which rests on the cliffs rising from the sea. The base itself is right behind the first houses, about three hundred meters from

the sea. It is around two kilometers wide and three and a half kilometers long, with a polygon for parachuting. The airfield is also nearby, three or four kilometers from the base, and usually contains between 1,000 to 1,200 people.

If Ante thought he was finished with his training and that the adventure was about to begin, he was cruelly deceived. Here he was confronted with even crazier and more difficult tasks, and more brutal discipline; sometimes it seemed to him that the dangerous German from Bonifacio had been mild in comparison.

Preparations for the first parachute jumps were demanding and merciless. The boys jumped from a height of three and a half meters, then continued running on hard sand, then a jump into a trench two and a half meters deep with sand at the bottom – which prevented a normal reflex – and then out of the trench over a completely smooth concrete wall. Those who failed on the first try, even with the help of a head start, had trouble with the sand, and some failed to get out even after several attempts. Nobody was allowed to help them; they were forced to stay in the trenches until they were able to get out by themselves. This was their “welcome” to the 2.R.E.P!

After parachute training and seven successful jumps, which took about a month, Ante became a full member of the 2.R.E.P. He received a diploma, tailor-made uniform, and corps insignia. He was then assigned to the 3rd corps, and within that corps, to the 2nd naval diversionary unit. And then more training began! Just when he thought it was all over. Actually, when he became a diver-diversionary, his wish from Fort. St. Nicholas

had been fulfilled; but on the other hand he felt like he was under the influence of an unknown mechanism. He began to feel pressured by the realization that he didn't know and would never know his next step, where he would be going and what he would be doing, while others who were looking after him knew all this in advance. He wasn't gloomy about it; it just bothered him. Like a hole in his shoe. Water was leaking in but he couldn't find the leak.

He dove for a month (to depths of 70 meters), ran kilometers and kilometers in the sea up to his knees, learned to fight underwater, swam distances up to six miles, and then they took him to Toulon. Here he boarded a submarine and practiced exiting into the sea through torpedo openings, and how to attack relay centers and command posts. He returned to the submarine the same way he had exited: through a torpedo opening about three and a half meters long and a meter wide. He learned to operate all possible weapons for underwater battle and above water, how to set explosives and deactivate underwater mines. And finally became a warrior. A professional and specialist.

And only then did he have the right to receive a salary. In reality, his salary had begun to accumulate from the moment he had signed the contract, but he hadn't been able to collect it. He was only allowed to draw one month's salary at one time; only with special permission could he take two months salary. He had everything, from medical care to a bank account, but he belonged to the Legion.

It decided what he could and could not do, where he would or would not go. It took his name and gave him a number, shut him up in a barracks where he had everything – movie theater, canteen and bordello – but he couldn't go into town without special permission. And then only if he were well-groomed, shaved, manicured, and had his shoes shined and hair cut. The Legion was like a mother, strict, sometimes coarse, but just and caring, and the legionnaires like children who had not yet reached adulthood.

The contract Ante and the other legionnaires had signed was for five years. Only after five years were you given back your name and allowed to have a family, under the condition that your rank was higher than that of an ordinary legionnaire. A new contract was the privilege of the officers and junior officers. An exception, which was rare, could be made after three years, but the individual had to have more than just impeccable recommendations.

Ante knew nothing about this at that time, and if he had, he wouldn't have given it much thought. His main concern was going into action for the first time. And soon that moment arrived.

Blood in the desert

Around Easter of 1974, a DC-9 landed in Djibouti. It had come from Salenar on Corsica, but it was legionnaires that disembarked, not civilians. They belonged to the battle company unit, and had come as reinforcements to 13. DIBLE, a half brigade of the

Foreign Legion stationed in a country known then as the *Teritorie Affars et Issas*; a year later it was named after its main city.

The area was located between Eritrea and Somalia, across from Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The French had been there since the *glorious* colonial times, as Djibouti occupied a particularly significant strategic area at the very entrance from the Red Sea into the Bay of Aden; that is, at the door to the Indian Ocean.

Unrest during this time was so great as to endanger the stability of this French-speaking area, which was inhabited primarily by the tribes after which the French named the territory. The problem was that the members of the Issas tribe were Somalians, and Somalia was under the fist of the then Soviet Union and its satellites. Sufficient reason for France to protect its *national interests*.

When Ante got off the plane, Africa welcomed him with a distinctive smell and sweltering air that almost fried him. The smell of Africa. It was hard to describe in words, but his nose identified it perfectly. But there was nothing unpleasant or disgusting about the unusual odor.

The newcomer perceived the smell of the black continent in the same way he perceived the dryness of the desert air. Even the outer world had adjusted to it: everything was somehow at rest as in a slow motion film, excepting the people, who gesticulated when they spoke.

Djibouti was mainly desert, excluding the northern part of the country, and was dotted with low volcanic protuberances and arid river beds. The protuberances and these dead rivers seemed even darker because of the black, sheer cliffs and scattered rocks. Oases could be found here and there, as though they had been thrown about randomly. There were the larger ones, those with more water and more substantial shrubbery, and the smaller, which served only as refreshment. Between them passed the old caravan trails which had transported salt and hashish since time immemorial, but also slaves for Saudi Arabia. Now they were used for smuggling weapons to the rebels and insurgents in this troubled region.

Ante's motorized convoy patrolled this uneasy area, mostly between *Lac'Assala* and the Somalian border. When you approached the lake, which was below sea level, it seemed as though you were on another planet. He was blinded by the deep blue surrounded by hillocks white as virgin snow. As though God had played a joke, transporting the landscape of the North Pole into this dazzling climate. The whiteness and deep blue merged in such an intense brilliance that the newcomer had the impression that mercury had been poured into his eyes. Without sunglasses, one was unable to even look at *Salt Lake*, which had been so dried out by the intense sun that crystal matter and hillocks had formed in the shoals.

Here the desert was especially cruel. There were no oases; it was the volcanic rock and stone that made the dark dapplings in the sand. The temperature during the day climbed

to over 50 degrees Celsius, and at night dropped to zero. Unless you drank some water every half hour or hour, you were unable to speak because you would find that your throat had dried up. The soldiers took salt pills regularly in order to maintain normal weight and precious minerals in their bodies. It was a hellish wasteland, but still strangely enchanting. Ante enjoyed the silence which descended over the blazing sand at sunset.

He had been patrolling the desert for three months already. One evening his motorized unit was moving slowly toward the caravan path which led from the Somalian border to the Red Sea. The boys were driving Willis jeeps with front windows that could be opened, and were armed with 12.7 caliber machine guns. The guns were mounted and able to rotate a full 360 degrees. Just the right weapons for the desert!

Ten jeeps were serving as escort for two trucks transporting provisions, equipment, and ammunition. There was no indication that the day was going to be in any way exceptional. And then the scout, who had already crossed through a canyon and come out onto a sand plateau, spotted a large caravan. There were about fifty people and forty heavily laden camels in the caravan. Where were they going and what were they carrying?

As soon as they had been informed of the caravan on the horizon, the boys assumed battle formation. The unit was commanded by a Vietnam veteran by the name of Fanchow. He was a consummate soldier and excellent commander, but a bit strange and

reserved. He never wanted to talk about Vietnam, but from time to time you would hear that he had been badly wounded there. On one occasion he was hit right between the legs after a parachute jump from a helicopter by a Vietnamese flame thrower. Later the boys saw the scars Fanchow had on his thighs from these serious wounds, but nobody had ever seen him naked. Some were sure he had been burned all over his body. In any case, he was very ambitious and always encouraged his boys to be the best. He spoke French with an American accent and a lot could be learned from him.

The caravan approached quickly. The guide in Ante's group, who was a native and knew not only the territory but all the local watering holes, told the caravan leader to have the camels kneel down and ordered everyone to raise their hands in the air and allow the provisions to be searched. Their answer was an immediate volley of bullets and firepower.

Ante threw himself immediately to the ground, searching for refuge behind the low volcanic rock. Bullets cracked whiplike through the air, hitting all over the place and shattering rock in all directions. His heart was pounding so fiercely that he felt it would burst out of his chest. He began to lose breath from fear, and his throat was like sandpaper. His body was shaking, strength sucked from his legs. And he lost his vision as well.

At one point he started to lose control and was no longer master of the situation or himself. He tried to breathe deeply and quiet his heart, which was pumping excess blood

into his brain and rendering his limbs and body useless. It didn't work. He was struggling with himself, but he still followed his orders, running toward the first cover, throwing himself on the ground, and firing. And rushing them again. He did this automatically, exactly as he had learned during his long and excruciating training.

And then he felt rage at his loss of control, panic, and fear. He was also ashamed, thinking of that damned German from Bonifacio...And then his heart began to calm, he regained his clear vision, and conquered his fear instead of being conquered by it. The thought went through his mind that everything was in the hands of Fate anyway, and if it was his Fate to remain forever on this sand desert, then so be it. He heard the voice of his commander calling the boys to stay in formation to avoid becoming each other's targets. His strength returned and soon he felt nothing at all. He was a warrior, concentrated on his assignment.

The battle lasted about half an hour and then a profound silence fell, as though a curtain had been lowered. They heard only random cries of animals who had urinated from fear, or the death rattles of the wounded. And then it stopped. A heavy peace descended on the desert, mixed with the smell of blood and feces. Ante sat down on a rock, took off his helmet, and rested his automatic P.M. 9 between his legs. His trial by fire was behind him.

Only then did he realize how scraped up he was from jumping and throwing himself down on the rough volcanic rock. He was burning up from all the scrapes and cuts. And

then he felt a pleasant sense of lightness, a return of his sense of calm and peace. As though the battle had drained him, leaving him empty and tranquil. He didn't feel happy, but had just a sense of dull exhaustion, nothingness.

“So there were weapons”. “Yes”, answered a voice, and added that the weapons were of Russian origin. “How many of those?” “Seventeen”, the same voice answered. Ante turned around and saw prisoners sitting with heads lowered, and then the first voice asked: “And the rest?” “Liquidated” answered the second, adding “there are some wounded but I don't think they'll live.” “And our guys?” “Only two wounded, no big deal.”

Only then did Ante notice that someone was giving first aid to the Slovenian, Sedik. He liked this guy well enough, but felt no particular sadness. Even later, when some of the men died, he still was not shocked by death. He just considered it an occupational hazard.

If you were a professional soldier and went to war because you wanted to, then the wounds, even death, were part of the job. There were and could not be any special emotions. It wasn't civilian life, and there were no friendships like in civilian life. Actually, legionnaires believed in the motto which had been imposed upon them from the beginning: *All for one and one for all!* This applied to the good and the bad. If somebody erred during a difficult exercise, everyone would be punished. The opposite was also true. That was a rule used even in war. A legionnaire would die for another

legionnaire but this had nothing to do with emotions. It was a duty, an element of one's professional conduct.

In time it seemed to Ante that he was living in two completely disparate worlds. Being a professional soldier meant belonging to a serious and brutal world to which you had to submit in order to stay on top, to survive. There was no place for intimacy because here, a true and real friendship could be a source of danger and risk.

He learned to keep quiet, and even came to believe that it was not fair to burden others with events in which they themselves had not participated. Especially those who didn't belong to their world. He felt this would destroy the balance between the two worlds as well as his own internal balance. He was convinced that this was the only way he could remain psychologically stable and strong, and preserve his untouched emotions without which he would be an invalid in the other world, the world of beauty or, more simply, the normal human world.

Mixing this in any way with the soldier's life and tasks would mean destroying the balance which enables you both to withstand the difficult and dangerous life of the warrior and, on the other hand, to still be touched by the look of a child, the warmth and smile of a woman, the innocence of animals.

Salad that makes you laugh

He loved Africa. It had a special aroma and adventure to it. He got to know it as a soldier and a warrior, tested himself there, and uncovered hidden emotions. He was enchanted by its slowed rhythms and contrasts. Nothing here was arranged according to logic or measurement: not water or vegetation or desert. And the people were also like this. Though exposed to barbarism and cruelty, they were unbelievably gentle and generous. These extremes gave life a particular allure and Ante felt more vital in Africa than ever before.

“Once you get to know Africa, you miss it”, he was known to say at times when he had spent a longer period in France. Life in *civilization* had become somehow bloodless and repulsive to him. Maybe this feeling was intensified by the monochromatic days on assignment, but in any case, in old, civilized Europe he used himself up quickly.

But then when he was in Africa, a longing for Europe would sometimes awaken within him, for the good life, its sophisticated aromas, and people with whom he shared the same traditions. Africa aroused in him an irresistible hunger for familiar foods. That is why he loved the life of a soldier and accepted the danger and rawness. It was the price one paid for intensified emotions and desires. For life itself.

Although he served in all the French-speaking countries of western and central Africa, he felt most strongly about Djibouti. He went back there sometime in June of 1975 on the occasion of the elections and formal independence of the country. A country where water was more valuable than gold, where the Orient and black Africa merged in a

unique way, and where the women were more beautiful than anywhere else. He was already an *old* warrior.

Whenever he arrived in Djibouti, he would go to the old harbor and look at the ships. They were fishing boats for the most part, painted in bright colors, red or blue, with masts and the characteristic sails in the form of misshapen squares. The ships and boats were unusually narrow for their length and had distinct, elevated helms. He headed instinctively for the harbor, “to see the fishermen” he would say. See if they were catching anything, check out their nets.

There he would forget himself for a moment and reminisce about his little sister. He felt no nostalgia for home, Pasma or Pakistan. It didn't bother him either that he hadn't written or that his family did not know where he was. In the Legion it was against regulations to write to anyone; this was strictly prohibited, and the Security Office monitored it closely.

But the image of his little sister, Anica, often came into his head. When he left for the Jela Topic, Anica had waved at him for a long time as he pulled away in the bus, her head inclined to one side. She had looked as though she was smiling, and when the bus moved off, it seemed to Ante that the smile changed into an expression of sadness. At the end, he saw only her right hand making little, awkward movements...

Anica was younger than Ante by only three years, but she always seemed younger and more fragile, perhaps because she was the only girl in the family. He thought much more seldom about his brother Boris, half brother Frane, and his other half brother Branimir. They were also younger than he, but they were male, men. Anica was different. She was *home*, his little angel. Like his mother who watched over him from heaven and prayed for him.

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When they went into town, the legionnaires dressed in formal tropic uniforms. Pants to the knee, sewn from fine, sand-colored sheeting. They had similar short-sleeved shirts and knee-high socks, also sand-colored, shoes and a white legionnaire's cap. Ante resembled a powerful *Steppenwolf*.

He was of average height, like his two grandfathers, but stronger. His legs were particularly strong, both by nature and from rowing, and later diving. His upper body gave the impression of being spindly, though his chest was quite broad, and he was compact but not stocky. His head was also powerful, with calm but penetrating eyes. It seemed to some that he was like a wolf, looking out at them from some hidden depths, evaluating them, unyielding. But as soon as he smiled, this impression disappeared and he came across as a young man bursting with strength and vitality.

He enjoyed most going to the Minelic square in the city center. The city was even more attractive and beautiful from there. It was full of people and he loved to observe them, their behavior, movements. He was especially taken by the women. Especially those from the *Affars* tribe. He learned quickly to distinguish them from the Somalian women. “You recognize them by their beauty”, he would tell the guys who had just arrived in Djibouti. “They’re lighter, with finer facial features, but somehow seem stronger.” And then he would continue to talk about their eyes that smoldered as though they contained dark coals, and about their velvet skin. “You also know them by their men, who are smaller, almost underdeveloped. And then would add: “as though God felt sorry for them and gave them beautiful, strong women.”

Some of these women would fix Ante the tea that was drunk in this country and which he especially loved. It was very aromatic and served in narrow, glass cups in which the women would put a pinion nut or a leaf of menthol. He tried it for the first time after a dinner in the *Second Quarter* of Djibouti, known for its color and dissipation.

He also ate a camel meat shish kebab, and ordered salad; the waiter brought him *cat*, which was a salad indeed. When he ate it, he started laughing insanely for no reason, and this lasted for almost two hours. But he wasn’t the only one. The whole restaurant was laughing

Even the ladies from the table opposite were laughing. So much so that he joined them and later was served the aromatic tea. Meanwhile, he learned that when you ordered

salad in the *Second Quarter*, you always got *cat*. And *cat* was a kind of drug that produced a senseless African laughter. Just like rainy, gloomy days in Europe bring forth sadness and despair.

Commandos

The little city of Pau was located on the French side of the Pyrenees, at the very foot of the massive mountains. It was only about one hundred kilometers from the Bay of Biscay and about two hundred from Bordeaux. There were no cultural or artistic monuments there that anyone would remember, and it wasn't particularly attractive. But it had a special training school in conjunction with the French army's rapid reaction forces (FAR).

The school's name was E.T.A.P. (*Ecole de troupes aéroportées*) and was within the elite 11th Parachute Division. This division was comprised of land forces of the F.A.R. which went into action first, and performed the most difficult assignments. Within the 11th Parachute Division was the 2. R.E.P. (parachute-diversionary corps). This was the strikepoint division belonging to the Foreign Legion, but was also the most elite unit of the French armed forces. The guys from the 2 R.E.P. went where nobody else could go.

In the French army, the epitome of the soldier's professional career is: entry into the E.T.A.P. and appointment to *commandos for intelligence and diversionary actions*. Every French army officer dreams of this, and it is also the goal of many of his

colleagues from America, Great Britain, and Germany. Whoever passes through E.T.A.P. is a super-soldier and becomes a member of the special unit (C.R.A.P.), whose uniforms are valued more than all *worldly glory*.

Only about three hundred of the active French commandos have passed through E.T.A.P. Training is hellish and just as costly, and those who finish return to their corps and special units, ready to be drafted at any moment to enemy territory, to attack their command and other vital centers, and to perform air strikes on enemy units and objects. Some say that these were the commandos sent to Belgrade and Nis when NATO struck these cities.

Only officers and higher officers were permitted to attend school in Pau; lower level Foreign Legion officers were allowed to attend (but only from 2. R.E.P.) as it was generally held that a rank in the Legion was worth at least two higher ranks in other units of the French army.

When Ante returned for the second time to the Calvi base in Djibouti, he had come as a lower ranking officer to train there. After six months of exhausting work he became a sergeant, and realized that the Foreign Legion was not just war, adventure, and exotic women, but also constant learning, practice, perfecting oneself, and learning to use the most advanced technology. "Until you got blisters on your hands, legs, and brain."

Colonel Gupil was a commander of the 2.R.E.P. and in his best years. He later became a general, which was logical considering how far he had come. He was a consummate soldier and knew his people to the depths of their souls. Not only from their dossiers, which followed every legionnaire around like a shadow, but also from personal contact. “Soldier”, the colonel said one morning several days before Christmas when Ante arrived in his room at the colonel’s command, “from today on, you are a candidate for E.T.A.P.! Please make note of this, as well as the fact that only two of twelve candidates are going to Pau.”

Ante’s head was spinning, he could scarcely believe his ears. He knew he was good, but not good enough to become a candidate for the school, whose name he hardly dared speak. “Could I possibly become a commando?” he asked himself, and then he collected himself quickly and answered: “At your command!”

The competition began, and you had to show your stuff: psycho-physical capabilities, theoretical military knowledge, ability to use all types of weapons, and capacity to maneuver tactically. It was literally a race in which it was not sufficient merely to fulfill the norms. You had to win, because everyone was capable of running faster than the norm.

Whoever wanted to go to Pau had to run thirty kilometers in full battle gear in under four hours, but that was not enough unless you finished the fastest. Whoever wanted to go to Pau had to be as good in the water as on land and in the air.

They would throw you out of a plane in the dark and bad weather, onto unknown territory, and you had to find the given points. And the time you got to orient yourself was what you were given by the other candidates! Ante knew this and also that he would not be getting a second chance. And since he wanted to reach his goal, it wasn't enough to know the way. He had to assimilate it, feel it under his legs even when he could not see it. He had to believe in it as he believed in himself, stroke it passionately, and want it like a lover.

At the beginning of 1976, twelve of them reached the goal. Ante was the first and a Jew named Gandijaz second, and those two, barely realizing what had happened, moved forward to the E.T.A.P. But it still was not over. There the whole procedure was repeated; it lasted only fifteen days, but it was the final qualification, condensed in order to force you to experience your entire life in only a few days. Ante did what he had done in Calvi: took his Fate by the horns and didn't let it go until all the others exhausted themselves and had to take a rest. He got blisters over his entire body.

But he succeeded! He was admitted to the fighting unit consisting of two officers and three petty officers. The boys were together all the time. They slept in the same room, went to lunch together, rested and trained at the same time. They were practically never apart. This was the principle that enabled the future commandos to know their maximum capabilities so that later, in difficult and dangerous diversionary and intelligence operations, they would be so used to each other that there would be no unexpected

reactions or moves. Above all, the height and physical characteristics had to conform to certain regulations. You could not be taller than 185 centimeters and not shorter than 178. You were required to weigh between 75 and 84 kilograms. Not only because of the equipment and weapons, but also because men of these dimensions and weight were best suited to their assigned tasks.

Ante spent four months in E.T.A.P, feeling at times like a Superman. Especially during training when he would be in a plane which was carrying his fighting unit to the Pyrenees, and then would parachute out in the dead of night, usually under difficult and dangerous weather conditions.

At such moments, he would close his eyes, like a theatre actor, and replay every step of the future operation in his mind until the plot played out to the finale. He had to be sure that everything flowed together, like a river that breaks up over waterfalls but comes together again at the bottom.

When he could almost physically feel his concentration, it seemed to him that body and soul had merged at one point; he had the feeling that even the hardest rock would shatter coming into contact with him. He would play it out in his mind, and the rock really would shatter into a thousand pieces!

He felt this kind of strength that morning. It was cold and cloudy. They were flying in a *Transall C190*, one of the best transport planes in the world, capable of flying in all types

of weather and at great heights, successfully carrying both soldiers and the heaviest cargo. His battle unit was to jump from a height of 7,500 meters.

He was in full battle gear, with oxygen and masks which were indispensable for jumps from such a height. The commander of the battle unit, a French captain, was given the battle plan in the plane, as was the procedure in such cases. In a sealed envelope together with plasticized maps. During the flight, he acquainted the men with their individual roles in the assignment, distributed maps to them with a description of their task, listened, and answered their questions. Then all were silent. Only the airplane motors could be heard.

When they had arrived at the assigned location, the trap door of the plane dropped down, creating a platform from which they were to jump. The head of the battle unit jumped first, after which a red light went on, the sign that the next in line should wait one minute. When the green light appeared and a siren sounded, it was cleared for the jump. Ante was the third, and after him came two others.

Everything transpired without a word and fairly quickly. The parachuters oriented themselves in air by the head of the unit, but also by the compass each had on his left hand. A height meter and chronometer were attached to their chest. As a rule, the first seven thousand meters were a precipitous free fall with the parachute opening 400 to 500 meters above the ground. Though they were traveling about 2000 kilometers an hour, the boys had no problem directing their fall with their parachutes and ensuring that they approached the curve. When Ante landed and reached the spot closest to the shoreline, he

squeezed out his last atom of energy to swim to land. He soon felt land under his feet, so he made one more lunge and crawled on all fours to the shore. Here he lay for ten or fifteen minutes. Not thinking or feeling anything; all he heard was his labored and rapid breathing.

A helicopter was flying above him, and then the medics arrived. “Are you hurt?” the doctor asked him. “No,” he managed to say, and the doctor asked somewhat uncertainly, “So you mean you’re just exhausted?”

The nurse and doctor helped him up, gave him an energy pill, and wrapped him in a blanket. Then the doctor continued, as though the conversation had not been interrupted: “But you were lucky, much luckier than the one who rammed into the building.” Only then did he hear that one of his colleagues had run into a large building trying to avoid the electric power pipelines, broken his hip and crushed his knee. He was French, the second one to parachute out, and his Fate was sealed forever because of a radar error.

The helicopter flew in again and Ante was once more in the air. He took a look at the raging river which seemed now to be lighter and calmer. In the distance were a bridge and the first houses of the city.

Training lasted several more weeks, and then he received his diploma with the number 581. He had become a commando, the most elite fighter of the French armed forces, member of the special detachment. He was on top of the world!

As a diver-diversionary he was equipped and trained for all special tasks of the air-deployment forces: he was a specialist on mining and explosive devices; a sniper; able to handle perfectly all forms of weapons including anti-tank and anti-air weapons; trained for close combat under all conditions; trained to communicate using the most advanced systems on an operational and tactical level; and an expert in deep surveillance and diversion. The number on his diploma indicated that these specialists were all quite young, that they were few and far between, and were the result of new military doctrine and technological development. Doctrines that focused on a shift from large, military formations toward smaller and more flexible units capable of performing all tasks autonomously and, when necessary, joining with other formations. Like the renowned and deadly 2.R.E.P.

Ante finished his E.T.A.P. training seventh in his class. He could have been better placed had French been his native language and had he been able to express himself better and more eloquently. Nonetheless, this was a good result taking into consideration that the training session that year had had 32 recruits and only 25 had finished.

When he returned to Calvi, he was admitted to C.R.A.P., 2.R.E.P. and was also a member of a fighting unit comprised of a Slovenian, Algerian, Portuguese, and a Breton. They slept in the same room and were inseparable. They all had the same blood group. As though they were living one life and breathing with the same lungs. But he was closest to the Algerian. Maybe because his nature was the most similar to Ante's. Sometimes it

seemed that he saw himself when he looked at the guy, as though he were looking into a mirror.

The Camel and the Mirage

In Faya all the houses were built from some kind of dense mud similar to clay. The color of sand. But the little city, which lay on the south edge of the Sahara, was actually very colorful, as all the buildings were constructed in the African-Oriental style with a lot of strange carvings on the entranceways and rounded doors and windows. The many terraces enhanced the impression of vitality, since people seemed to live on them as though they were public squares. North of Faya are the hard, rocky mountains of Tibesti, their peaks over 3000 meters high. Here Chad borders on Libya.

An entire brigade could hide itself in these mountains and canyons. Especially if it only moved at night. Because all there is is sound, and even this is an unreliable ally here. The mountains are surrounded by desert and the desert consumes everything in it. The mountains and the sounds in them are all devoured by the desert; it expropriates everything. Because everything belongs to it, just as life belongs to death. The Bedouins use this greediness of nature to excellent advantage, especially when they are armed to the teeth and have deadly intentions.

At the end of 1977, the situation in Chad became complicated again. Gaddafi had drawn the rebel leaders over to his side, given them lethal desert weapons: powerful 4x4 Jeeps with heavy machine guns and anti-tank and air systems. Intelligence data showed that the rebels were crossing into Chad and moving quickly toward Tibesti. At their head was a fanatical desert fighter some accused of being an Islamic extremist; others said he was a die-hard Communist. He was tall and skinny but tough, with curly, coarse hair. His face was angular and his eyes dark and ominous. He had a strange name and a strong desire to take over power in N'Djamena.

This was a sign for alarm. The specialists were brought into the country with the task of entering the Tibesti mountains on their own, and identifying and discovering the exact location of the rebel forces so that the air forces could liquidate them. There was no other way, no technology was capable of performing this task. Only the commandos were able to outsmart the desert and the rebels.

Several battle units were deployed to penetrate these jackal's lairs, but they were no longer in any kind of contact. Each unit performed its specific part of the assignment and looked out only for itself. Ante and his fellow comrades landed under a starry sky precisely at the assigned spot, from a more than 6000 meter height. As soon as they landed they put on their masked uniforms, and from that moment on were just eyes and ears. Their assignment was to expose the rebels without the rebels exposing them.

Otherwise....

It was clear that there was only one means of escape in such a case: fighting to the death. Anything else would have been worse. Because Africa was cruel and bloody. Especially when provoked by a white man, who many Africans thought was good for nothing unless he could be cheated or deceived.

One commando unit deployed into Tibesti the same night as Ante's had bad luck. They were exposed. It came to a fight during which the rebels succeeded in taking a soldier prisoner; the others managed to escape with the assistance of a helicopter. This poor guy paid the price for what the commandos had done to the rebels' convoys with their deadly mirage F1 attacks. When they brought him into their camp, they tore off his battle fatigues, threw him to the ground and then, as though amusing themselves, began kicking him in the stomach. A few held his hands and legs while another young man with a thin beard carefully drew a knife across his stomach, above the bladder, pulling it gently toward the diaphragm. The operation was conducted with such bestial concentration and care that not even the tormented shudders or moans of the soldier interrupted them. Then they tied him underneath a camel and left him to tortures only desert people can devise. The camel, which is known to urinate often, urinated on the unfortunate soldier's intestines and guts so often and copiously that he suffered agonies no human being can long endure.

When the rebels returned the body later to the French during an exchange, the autopsy revealed that he had not died from the wounds the rebels had inflicted upon him. His heart had literally burst from the pain he could no longer withstand at the end.

They later suspected that because of this case, the commandos were extracted relatively quickly from Tibesti. They had been there barely five days, but had done a lot of damage to the rebels during that time. Ante's unit was the one that had enabled the air forces to carry out 20 attacks on the rebels.

Most frequently attacked were convoys of up to twenty vehicles. As soon as the *Mirages* flew in, everything was over in seconds. The rocket systems were as deadly as they were precise. The air would glow with orange flames, and then a horrendous explosion would follow after which everything turned into a huge ball of smoke and dust. It dispersed quickly, and where there had been heavy jeeps only seconds before, armed with heavy weapons, there were now only burnt craters. There were no corpses, or at least it seemed so. Did the earth devour them before the deadly rocket assaults?

These scenes represented to the commandos a triumph of their own skills. They knew when the *Mirages* were coming, knew what would happen, and knew that those underneath watching as though from a theatre gallery suspected nothing. And then the light, the loud and the deafening *boom*....Then nothing, only the gigantic craters! They felt nothing except the kind of professional satisfaction a person feels after a job well done. The belief that war was not a conflict between individuals but between states, armies, and paramilitaries had been deeply instilled in them. Thus there was no room for emotion or sympathy. These human beings were only chance victims. Like the

unfortunate soldier who had suffered agony enough for an entire corps. Or the rebels who were eradicated with one *boom* from the face of the earth.

Gaddafi had sent about 1500 to 1700 well-armed and trained rebels to Tibesti. For a country such as Chad, which was more than 25 times larger than Croatia and had less than 7 million inhabitants, this represented a significant and dangerous force, as could be seen by the numerous military coups and the borders, which nobody manned or supervised; supervising the borders was not possible in cases where the white man had simply created a country by the stroke of a pen and ruler. In the five days the commandos were in Tibesti, the rebels were hammered to such a degree that their commander “suddenly discovered ” that there was a better boss than Gaddafi and became a trusted partner of the West, enabling Chad to live at least for a while in a tenuous state of peace.

Stuffed giraffe

It was four in the morning. Night was fading away, like a rich burgundy being diluted by water. Kolwezi was sleeping, or so it seemed. A heavy smell, a mixture of blood, fecal matter, and alcohol wafted over the city, spreading to the edges of the savanna. And then a sound from far away could be heard, like someone on a moped who could not yet be seen but was kicking up dust. The sound became louder and louder, and then deafening. The sky got black and this blackness descended over 500 meters like a huge cumulo-nimbus. It was the *Hercules* which had just flown in from Kinshasa. They flew in a layered_formation, seven of them, one above the other, fifty meters apart. When they

were 3-4 kilometers from Kolwezi, parachuters began to exit these airborne monsters, one after the other, as though on a production line. There were about 400 of them.

Those below, some awakened from a dream or a hangover, were surprised but responded with massive firepower. The sky was aflame, people were flying through the air and shooting; as soon as they touched the ground, they rushed forward like a well-trained rugby team. Dawn broke, and with it certain distinct aromas.

Kolwezi was a little town on the outskirts of Shaba (Katanga), one of the richest mining areas in the world. There was a lot of everything here: copper, tin, zinc, uranium and diamonds, for which Zaire was probably best known. The Europeans had discovered this long ago and settled in Kolwezi. Most were engineers who worked for the big, foreign companies. The majority were Belgian, but there were also French and some English. All in all about 3000, together with their wives and children and a good number of black servants and workers.

At the end of 1978, about 3000 rebels led by Cubans from nearby Angola attempted to take over power in Shabu. If they had succeeded, Mobutu and Kinshasi would have fallen, maps would have had to be redrawn, and perhaps the Russians would have gotten involved. The rebels had their own interests. They fought effortlessly and remorselessly, especially if they had indulged in alcohol and hashish. Some claim their eyes had turned red from this, and their souls bestial. In any case, when the parachuters jumped from the *Hercules*, Kolwezi was already under control of the rebels. It was a short-lived but cruel

government, the kind Africa knew well. The rebels raped the white as well as the black women, and killed their children and husbands. There were literally blood orgies. Was this violence as a kind of epidemic? Just a passing phase? Or African nature?

As Ante was descending with his parachute, 370 civilians, among them many children, had already been murdered in Kolwezi. Mobutu's soldiers had fled, and talks with the rebels had collapsed. France and Belgium had no other choice but to try to save their people by themselves.

The action was quick, literally a *Blitzkrieg*. In only 48 hours the city had been liberated, the surroundings combed, and the rebels eliminated. More than a thousand prisoners were taken and turned over to the regular Zaire military, which was much worse for them than if they had been killed on the spot. About the same number died in the battle, which was more like killing ants, because as soon as the going got rough, the Cubans retreated and the rebels turned into a mob fleeing in the chaos. Those who got left behind shed their uniforms in a flash for civilian clothes.

There were also losses on the other side: two killed in the air, nine in the battle, and 40 wounded. Ante participated in destroying one of the stronger hideouts where resistance was the most vigorous. But this was done quickly and routinely. As soon as he entered the city, he was assailed by a heavy smell: the odor of decaying guts, dried blood, and other stench. As though produced by the terror of death. The rebels that had succeeded in changing their uniforms ran toward the victors, grabbing them by the hand and

feigning appreciation. But their eyes, red from hashish and filled with fear, betrayed them. When they came towards Ante, he would push them away with his machine gun, hard enough so that they would tumble to the ground. He never shot at them. Or kicked them. He didn't even want to look at them.

A woman came out of a house near a big warehouse, and looked around as though she feared something would fall on her head. Her eyes showed fear and disbelief, but also a suppressed joy just waiting to express itself. Under this pressure, her face twitched and assumed a deranged expression, like that of a lunatic or people who escape from death at the last moment. She had by the hand a mute and ragged six year old girl holding a stuffed giraffe. When the woman noticed Ante, she stopped for a moment and then ran, leaving the child and throwing herself around his neck. "God sent you, God, only he could have done this!" she moaned quietly. Ante stood transfixed, not knowing what to do or say. He stood there for about thirty seconds and then the woman moved away. She said something else, her face expressing joy and sadness simultaneously. Then he looked at the girl, who was still holding her giraffe. He patted her on the head and went toward the warehouse.

Some of his men were already there. Thousands of plump flies were flying around, buzzing like miniature helicopters. They entered the mouths and guts of people who had been massacred and were lying on the dirty ground. There were as many women and children as men. Some had been killed by machetes, others by bullets, and many had been only half dead and had been left to end their lives in agony. This could be seen by

their facial expressions, twisted hands, and unnaturally contorted legs. Many had bloated stomachs, purple faces, and swollen fingers. All together sixty dead. The tropical climate had done its work: the corpses began to decompose as soon as their hearts stopped beating.

“Life is a very cheap affair”, said one of Ante’s fellow comrades, looking at him as though seeking validation. “Regardless of one’s color”, Ante answered. “This is Africa, here you die and give birth quickly.” And then he turned his head and went out immediately. The other man went out with him, and after a moment, Ante continued: “There’s no sense looking at it. The horrible smell you can’t get away from is bad enough, the smell of death and septic tanks, as though we’re in a human slaughterhouse.” Then he took out a cigarette, lit it, inhaled a few times and, as though talking to himself, continued: “A true professional never looks longer than necessary and never does more than what is needed...” He remembered the woman with the child and the giraffe, thinking: “And what could I have done for her? I am a soldier, not a psychiatrist. And what could she have told me? What has she gone through?”

He had an irresistible urge to leave the city where everything was pitiful and ugly, especially the bloodshot eyes of the black soldiers who had a few hours ago been the masters of death. Now they were looking death in the eye, as though seeing it for the first time. “Kinshasa”, he thought, “it’s a different life there. There are beautiful white women there.”

He stayed about ten days in Kinshasa. When he returned to the base in Calvi, he was quarantined for fifteen days. He was not allowed to go into the city, and was examined thoroughly by the doctors, including psychological examinations. Then he took his yearly vacation.

He was also awarded another fifteen days, which made 45 days altogether! He was free, but only in a manner of speaking. Which meant that he could spend his vacation only in a legionnaire's camp, either in France or elsewhere.

Every morning at eight o'clock, the legionnaire in these camps was required to report to the duty officer of the military police. This was a measure against desertion, a type of disciplinary quarantine. Actually, if a legionnaire was also an officer, had good evaluations, and was trustworthy, he could report by telephone so that he could spend the night with a girlfriend, but he was not allowed to leave the area of the respective garrison.

The men nonetheless looked forward to the vacations because they could completely relax, lounge around, and spend money. Ante especially loved to explore new cities. Not only their night life, but the people, their customs, behavior. This relaxed and calmed him. As though he had suddenly changed roles. He was no longer in a leading role. Others were now performing and he was in the audience watching them. He noticed the smallest details, the faintest aromas....as though *civilization* were redeeming him.

Gainsbourg

The French celebrate Republic Day on July 14th, but this is also a day when legionnaires give their shirts an extra good ironing. That is, those who have been assigned to participate in the procession of the French Armed Forces. *Champs Elysees* is full of color, uniforms, and glory on this day. The Foreign Legion usually contributes one military unit, about thirty officers, junior officers, and regular legionnaires to the procession. All are dressed in summer parade uniform.

They wear black boots around which sand colored pants are tied. The pants cover only the first button of the boots, and are ironed so that the crease down the middle is sharp as a razor blade. The shirts are the same color, long-sleeved, and rolled up to just above the elbow. But they are ironed in a special way. In the front, from the collarbone to the pockets, there are three sharp ironed creases divided by about two inches. The middle line falls exactly on the buttons, and the outer lines on the left and right edge of the pockets. Under the pockets is another ironed crease which leads to a dark blue cloth sash wrapped three and a half times around the legionnaire's waist. Above that is a parachuter's belt (for the boys from 2.R.E.P.) made of material similar to that of the belt to which the parachuter's knife is attached on the left, and a pistol on the right, in a holster. Everything is olive green. The officer carries no other weaponry, but the junior officer carries an automatic weapon, and the legionnaire a rifle over his shoulder.

The shirts are specially ironed on the back. Across the shoulder blades are three parallel lines which cover the entire width of the back, and three similar vertical lines go down

the length of the spine. Legionnaires use various methods for ironing these lines to ensure that they maintain their crispness during the parade or excursions into town. Usually they put a little wax or regular soap on the inside which makes the material sticky and stiff so that when ironed, the shirt conforms to the strict rules.

Officers and junior officers wore black legionnaire's caps with a dark red horseshoe, and regular legionnaires their traditional white caps with the legionnaire's symbol: a horseshoe with a stylized flame. Their shoulders were covered with epaulettes with red fringe, and around their neck they wore dark green ties tucked into the shirt between the fourth and fifth buttons. Officers also wore white gloves. All marched in unison, their faces clean-shaven and resolute, boots polished so that the brims of their caps were reflected on them.

But they were not particularly excited. It was an exhausting procession lasting three hours which required a lot of preparation, and it was an obligation to be performed like all others. Ante participated in his first procession in 1975, and this one, in 1978, was his second. He was looking forward in the afternoon to a lunch he was attending with several other colleagues at the home of an old and respected French family. It was a tradition that the President of the Republic organize a reception in the Elysee Palace for the important guests, and that other Parisian families who could afford it do the same, but on a more modest scale.

He set out later that same afternoon for a Paris residential neighborhood on the outskirts of Neuilly. Here in a spacious villa surrounded by a park resided the family who produced the famous St. Juliane and the respected red Bordeaux wines. There were about fifty guests, one of them Serge Gainsbourg. A world famous artist, with typical Jewish features and bags under his large eyes, a three day old beard, and dressed in jeans and shoes without socks. He smoked Gitanes and always had two packs with him, afraid he would run out. He achieved world fame with his song *Je t'aime, moi non plus*.

Ante was at that time twenty three years old and knew very little about music, but he liked Gainsbourg right away. His hippie attitude, the aura of Parisian *boheme* he exuded, which of course meant women and money, appealed to Ante. "Hello, boys. Is this your first time in Paris?" Gainsbourg asked the legionnaires casually, as though talking to old friends and not boys who could have been his sons. Ante told him it wasn't his first time, but that he did not know Paris well. Gainsbourg responded, "You should get to know it. It's a beautiful city. And then there's the other..." When he said those last words, he smiled enigmatically. That same night, Ante told him about Africa, and he was so impressed by these adventures and the soldier's life that he gave him his calling card when they parted ways later that night.

A friendship which lasted years developed, up until Gainsbourg's death in the mid 1980s. As though the singer had seen something in the young warrior that he had carried in himself but never realized, having wasted away his youth in the smoke of his *Gitanes*.

And in the singer Ante saw a world from which he had fled before he had even gotten to know it. A world to which he always returned.

In the Sights

It was the beginning of summer. The sun was beating down and the air was full of moisture, which made the heat heavy and sticky. Ante felt it as soon as he got off the plane. He was all alone, dressed in a gray linen suit. He wore an unlined jacket, and beneath it a T-shirt with three buttons. Also gray, but much darker. On his feet were black loafers. He had no sunglasses, though it was blindingly bright. He had never worn them, from the beginning of his military career, because he was somehow afraid they would restrict his range of vision; later he just became used to going without them and wore desert glasses instead. Even those he wore less often than he should have.

He didn't stay long in Dakar. Only long enough to catch a plane to Abidjan. In a few hours he had flown over many statelets crowded along the African Atlantic coast. These were of course small countries in comparison with the larger states in the interior of the continent. But they were also different for another reason: here a lot more people lived in the cities. Abidjan, whose center resembled a typical European city, with many skyscrapers and modern office buildings, was located right on the shores of the Bay of Guinea. It was not the capital city of the Ivory Coast, but was the most important city in the statelet, squeezed between Liberia and Ghana.

As soon as he left the airplane, he sensed that something was wrong. His sixth sense told him this. Everything appeared normal, but something was different. He had the impression that the expressions on some of the faces did not fit the atmosphere of the airport. But he walked on in a relaxed manner, as though none of it had anything to do with him. In his left hand he carried a small travel bag with the essentials, another pair of shoes, and a few other items. But his instincts had awakened, and he smelled danger.

He took a taxi to the Hotel Intercontinental in the center of town, checked into a room, and immediately dialed a telephone number he had with him. He knew only that he was to ask for Michael, that this person was a contact, and that he would get further instructions from him. But on the other end of the line, a voice answered coldly and curtly: "Michael is not here". And then added: "Don't call again, he will call you. In two days."

This was confirmation that his instincts had not betrayed him: things had gone wrong. He sat on the bed and considered what to do. He decided to go out. It was clear that he was completely on his own and would have only himself to depend upon. But at the same time he felt a need for people, for a crowd, the masses. Because he was somehow protected in a crowd, and still alone enough to react. Trechville was the kind of place he needed.

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At that time, the President of the Ivory Coast was Felix Houphouët-Boigny, a typical African dictator who had ruled for a long time and worked well with the West. The problem was that he was quite old and one of the political factions wanted to take advantage of this, a group in which Shiite elements exercised great influence. The declassified Palestinians and Lebanese who lived in the Ivory Coast. In other words, supporters of Khomeini's *Islamic Revolution*. The West was concerned and had sent several commandos on a special mission. But they did not know what kind of a mission. They were only told that they were to travel as civilians to Abidjan, individually so as not to attract attention, and that they would learn the rest when they arrived. From their *contact persons*. Unless something unexpected and dramatic occurred.

But something already had happened to Ante. He had been made by the enemy's intelligence services and he was soon to find that out. He left the hotel and took a taxi straight into Trechville, a typical African quarter which never sleeps. Business was done in the daytime in markets and small shops, and at night, there was drinking and carousing and lots of shady dealings. The quarter was about the size of Zagreb's Tresnjevka and somehow resembled it, only in the African manner. It had buildings built in the colonial style, but most were humble, African ground levels made of a mixture of mud and wood and covered with cloth. The outer walls had holes about twenty centimeters around drilled in them to allow the air to circulate better and pull the humidity from the living space. In Trechville the Africans looked somehow more African. Women were wrapped in traditional garb, and the men gesticulated more flamboyantly.

The taxi stopped in front of the *Bananas* discotheque where he had been before and which he knew well. There were two entrances and exits, it was quite spacious, and held several hundred people. At the side was a bar where people stood, about twenty meters long, and opposite it chairs with small tables. He leaned against the bar, off to the side so that he could see the main entrance, and from the mirror above the bar the middle entrance, which was behind him. He had a knife on his belt and a small pistol similar to a Dillinger. This he always carried with him. The pistol had two barrels, one above the other, and only two bullets. An excellent weapon for close range battles up to 5-6 meters. There were already quite a few people in the room, most of them dancing and the others talking and groping in the dark. He was drinking a Coca Cola and began talking casually to a black woman. This was no problem in Abidjan; it was enough to introduce yourself as, say, Tom, offer the woman a drink, and you had guaranteed company for the evening.

And then two black men entered! He immediately recognized the younger one, who was somewhat lighter skinned, probably a mulatto, as an executioner. He had a shaved head, athletic body, and quick, flexible legs. He walked more on his toes than his feet, and it seemed as though he could attack lightning quick at any moment. His face was fine-featured and one could have been deceived if it were not for the eyes: deep set and burning diabolically. He was about 1,9 meters tall, dressed in European pants and a light windbreaker with rolled up sleeves. Around his neck he wore a thick, gold chain. Ante noticed that he wore rings, one of which, on the right hand, was so large that he could have used it as a boxing glove. The other man was a bit older, between thirty and

thirty five, and carried himself like a bodyguard. The glasses he wore and his large stomach fit this impression.

They came directly towards him, weaving around the dancers. But they were in no hurry. He kept them in sight, but continued talking. When they came to about 5-6 steps from him, he turned toward the back exit, telling the black woman he would be right back and to wait for him. He went outside. He knew exactly where he was going as he had taken this route before. The doors led out onto a little street which was about a hundred meters long. The first part was well lit, and guests were still sitting outside at tables. And then the street became darker and darker and almost empty. After a hundred meters one could turn left into another street, which was lit from the lamps of a nearby square where taxis waited, or keep on going straight in the dark. When he passed the last table, he sensed that the executioner was following him, but not close enough for him to have to react. He did not turn around, but continued on, not too fast or too slow. He intuitively felt the antagonist and sensed his intentions. When they were alone, deeply immersed in darkness and only a few steps away from the crossing, the decision had to be made: into the dark or the light. The executioner waited for a moment, since the situation afforded him the chance for an attack, and, it seemed to him, a safe escape. But Ante had slowed down just a few seconds before as though he were undecided which way to go. He therefore gave the impression that he was occupied with this thought and nothing else. This surprised the executioner and he then also came to a stop. At that moment, Ante turned lightning quick and looked him straight in the eye. He was only about two steps

away, but he hesitated for a moment before finally gathering his senses and concentration and pulling out his machete. But it was too late to strike a blow.

Ante was back in the taxi in a split second and then in the hotel. He took his things, telling the receptionist: “If Michael asks for me, tell him I will get hold of him.” Then he went to a restaurant, stayed there several minutes, took another taxi, and headed for the Ghana border. To the Club Mediterranee, which he also knew from before. He stayed there three days. He made contact with Michael, and afterwards met him in Yamoussoukrou. The birthplace of the elderly President, which was for this reason proclaimed the capital city.

He wrote a report for the Security Office about the events in Abidjan, giving a brief account of what had happened and why and how he had reacted. He later learned that other commandos had also had problems, but they were still able to later perform their assignment: training the units of the Presidential guard and gendarmes in the fight against *subversive (Islamic) elements*. And as time showed, very successfully.

Monique

Serge Gainsbourg was married to the actress Jane Birkin, with whom he had a daughter; later they divorced and he was living with an exotic beauty whose father was French and served in the Foreign Legion in Indochina. The famous singer and his then girlfriend loved to socialize with different types of people, the only criterion being that they were

interesting and somehow different from the others so that it was never boring and everyone could learn something new, or at least hear an old story told another way.

Serge had a huge 700 square meter house in *Montparnasse*. The French called such mansions *hotel particulier*, though they had nothing in common with hotels. Here he and his girlfriend often hosted parties and receptions and sometimes had guests. Whenever he was in Paris, Ante was Serge's guest. He met many fascinating people there, among them the famous designer, Jean Paul Gaultier. As a result of this acquaintance, he later bought his safari clothing exclusively from Gaultier. But the most important acquaintance he made was with Serge's fortune-teller, Monique.

She was his first love, and she waited for him through all his trips to Africa or to the base in Calvi. He returned to her like a traveler who always stayed in the same hotel; he called her on the phone, met her in his dreams. He was already a junior officer, and had gotten back his real name, so there was nothing preventing him from having Monique.

She was beautiful, vibrant, and a little older than he, but not much. She was twenty six and amicably divorced. Though she had a six year old daughter, she could not endure marriage to a man fifteen years older than she, a man who gave her everything except a reason to detonate. And there was a bomb inside her waiting to be ignited, fantasies and hidden dreams eager to be transformed into a thousand passionate tremblings.

The first time Ante saw Monique, he was overwhelmed by her graciousness and the slit in her narrow skirt up to her thighs. She looked at him with her brown eyes - lively, fiery, but warm and gentle at the same time. She was slim and tall, but rounded and sensual. He was especially attracted by her long, soft neck and the aroma of her silky skin.

“I hear you’re a soldier and go to Africa often” she said after Serge had discreetly left them alone on the terrace. “Yes, I do”, he said, and then went on to talk about how Africa has a unique fragrance and that it is a different world there. Then he was silent for a moment, after which he looked her directly in the eye and continued, almost conspiratorially: “The desert is the cruelest lover of all, because once it bewitches you, it never releases you. It would rather kill you.”

Monique listened to him, just barely moving her lips, as though she were repeating his words. Her large, round eyes got even wider, and a certain dissoluteness overcame her. “I’ve always wanted to go to Africa on safari,” she said in a tone that indicated a memory of forgotten dreams. Then she smiled mysteriously, and this excited Ante; she was like blood to a hungry wolf.

The woman began to attract him intensely; he felt a strange and incomprehensible need for her company, her closeness. It wasn’t just erotic. It was something both more and less. He sometimes felt like a man who had come home after a long journey, reveling in the earlier intimacies and tender memories, but regretting his long absence. And she?

Did she see in him only an exotic male who was like a wolf among the masses of Parisian mutts? Whose fiery body held the secrets of Africa? Of a world that seduces and excites?

The next day he invited Monique for dinner. First he thought of taking her to a fancy restaurant, but Serge recommended he not do that. "Go to some simple dive where there are lots of people and where nobody famous will recognize her." So this is what he did, and after dinner, after a few glasses of Bordeaux, his hunger was unquenchable. They went to the Latin Quarter and then on to Monique's apartment.

In the morning they took off for a lovely little town on the Atlantic coast and stayed there two days. Monique listened to him talk of Africa and she sighed as she satisfied his hunger with her own. He felt like a warrior who had come home after rough times and who needed more than just a fleeting touch of a woman to rescue his soul. But not enough to stay forever. He loved Monique in the same way a soldier accepts his destiny: surrender to it and then seize it.

When he would go off to the battlefield and be gone for months, Monique would write him and send photographs. Not often, but always with accumulated longing. He was allowed to receive letters and to write, as he was already a junior officer and had a right to his real name. But he did not write. He was a bad correspondent, and because of this didn't even write to his people in Pakostan. He had only sent his brother one card in all this time. But he called Monique on the telephone. Sometimes he would talk to her for a

half an hour from some African outpost, luxuriating in her voice, which was so beautiful to him that he suspected this was the reason he didn't write to her.

But Fate interfered with love. The Fate of a warrior and a commando. Ante Gotovina, sergeant of the Foreign Legion, was in its power only.

Like a blow from a heavy fist

When wild dogs hunt antelopes on the African savannas, they do it in an amazingly sensible manner. The pack is organized so that one group provokes the herd to flee while the other cuts off its path to scatter them; the third injects fresh forces, and the fourth delivers the final blow, ensnaring the victim. But before the final step, the deadly game passes through many other phases, tactical variations, and tricky maneuvers. But everything develops precisely and calculatingly, as though the action had been guided by an unseen hand.

In Chad, there was again unrest. The predominantly Arab north had once more boiled over. Whether the country's fragile balance had been upset by certain internal events or by external interference was always the question in Africa. There was reason to believe that former colonial powers sometimes consciously provoked internal conflict in order to demonstrate their power and domination.

And then there were situations where other powers and interested parties did the same thing. Sometimes the conflicts broke out due to inertia fed by ethnic, cultural, and other differences, interests and rivalries. At the beginning of 1981, French forces which were stationed in Chad as part of the military collaboration struck the rebel convoys northeast of Faja. These were well armed motorized units with brave, tough desert fighters who knew how to use the terrain in the desert border areas.

The air forces broke them up but did not destroy them. They dug into the black desert ravines, waiting for night to fall so that they could scatter and escape without being observed. In the daytime the air forces couldn't distinguish them from the rocks and desert furrows, and at night they couldn't hurt them because they were as elusive as a shadow. This was therefore a job for the commandos.

The commandos went into the *cleaning up operation* by helicopter from Faja. There were eight specialists in each one, and two *Gazelles* supplied air support. For security reasons, they flew about fifty meters above ground, using area configurations. The farther they got from the city, the rockier the desert became, full of cliffs and ravines, dunes and shallow declivities. And a few pitiful oases, with the Bedouins driving their small herds and looking like white dots on the huge panorama.

As soon they flew in, about forty kilometers northeast from Faya, the helicopters landed quickly and kept their motors running. The commandos, wearing desert glasses and scarves around their mouths protecting them from the swirling sands, ejected in a flash.

As a single unit. Five battle units plus a commander, medic, communications officer, member of the Security Office, and a native translator.

About 700 meters in front of them, on the cleft of a hill about 200 meters long, their antagonists were waiting. There were about 40 of them, armed well with grenades, heavy weapons, Kalashnikovs, and sniper rifles. And hidden even better. As though they were part of the landscape.

The operation was commanded by a captain who was about 33 or 34 years old, average height, athletically built, and who, like most true soldiers, spoke very little. He was tough and unbelievably fast, cold, and unemotional. But he watched out for his people, took care of them. The assignment he had been given was vital. He later became a general, which was not unusual for someone who had commanded consummate soldiers such as the commandos at his tender age.

As soon as they jumped from the helicopters, the commanders took battle positions. The helicopters retreated to a safe location and the *Gazelles*, ensuring that they were out of enemy range, remained in the air. On the left were the first and second battle units, which had the forward assignments. In the middle were the third and fourth, and on the right wing the fifth, which served as a kind of reserve and maneuvering force. Ante was at that time the head of the third battle unit, and before landing had worked out the part of the plan he had received for his unit. The entire attack was so well prepared that it evolved almost without words. Everyone knew what he was to do.

When the heads of the units answered the commander's question: "Ready?" in order: "One, ready!"; "Two, ready!"; "Three, ready!"; "Four, ready!"; "Five, ready!", the order to "move out" followed. From this time on, everything went according to the logic dictating the tactics of such battles. The first and second battle unit moved forward quickly. While the first took control of the territory, five of the commandos from the second unit, *buried* between the cliffs, afforded them protection. Then the roles changed, also in order. Everything took place rapidly. The commandos ran zigzag, jumping back and forth from the left to the right, and then throwing themselves all of a sudden to the ground, taking refuge. The first and second battle units moved directly along the left wing, the shortest possible route. A hundred meters behind them they joined up with the third and fourth, and then the fifth, which had started last, and then turned immediately to the right, in the direction of the left flank of the Chadians and their possible escape route. From the plateau where they were located it was only possible to move out in this direction, because in front of them were commandos and opposite, behind their backs, precipices which were almost completely perpendicular and about twenty meters deep. Besides this, the fifth was protecting the flank of the fourth from any eventual surprise penetration by the antagonist.

All the positioning and progression of the battle lines took place in spooky silence. Only the whirring of the helicopters could be heard in the distance, like a faraway but threatening thunderstorm. The first and second battle units moved quickly to within 150 meters of the antagonists. Here they waited until the third and fourth, which were taking

a longer route along the right, approached. Their position in this phase was at about 250 meters. The enemy had already assumed a half circle defense, but had not yet fired a shot. Actually, the front line fighters had Kalashnikovs and sniper rifles, and the second line, at a somewhat elevated location, heavy automatic weapons. And behind them, in a small valley, 60 caliber grenade launchers. Then the order to begin the third attack phase was given.

The first and second battle units quickly spread out, attempting to provoke the enemy with their penetration. At the same time, the third and fourth were hunkered down in their firing positions. Armed with the deadly FAMAS which were equipped for this occasion with optics and sniper 12.7s. Just waiting for the targets to appear. The first and second units penetrated so quickly that the Chadians had nowhere to go and opened fire. But with this they exposed their positions and became targets for the third and fourth units, who attacked the firing positions of the enemy. The shooting from both sides increased and soon became a deafening roar. As though the desert had been transformed into a huge tin can being bombarded by hailstones. Every bullet could be heard hitting stone, which then shattered and skittered off in all directions. It also sounded like a bell and a boom of thunder smelling of blood and gunpowder.

The Chadians opened fire with all their weapons, and the commandos returned fire with snipers and FAMAS, which with their optics were extremely accurate from a distance up to 300 meters. This heavy exchange lasted a full twenty minutes and during this time, the commandos approached dangerously close to the first lines of defense.

Then the Chadians re-formed their defense in the shape of an open letter L. They began to attack with grenades as well, but imprecisely. In any case, they offered tough resistance and defended themselves competently. But then fifth unit entered the battle at lightning speed. From the right they entered the enemy flank and threatened their grenade launcher positions, beginning to completely surround them. The Chadians realized this and attempted to again re-form their forces and strengthen their left wing. But now the third and fourth units intensified their attacks at the other defense flank, forcing them to retreat from their initial plan and causing them heavy losses at the same time. The battle lasted about an hour and a half; the commandos were about 80 meters from the enemy, who was fleeing in panic. The tempo sped up, like steps in an Argentine tango. They ran faster, but more often just took cover.

As he crossed over from one cliff to another, Ante felt a terrific blow to the left side of his head, a little above his temple. And then a powerful flash of lightning. As though someone had struck him with a heavy fist. But he still took several more steps. Then the lightning changed into a huge light that rained on him what seemed like immense balls of some sort. He had the feeling that the light had gone into his face, and then even more quickly receded. It got smaller and smaller and smaller. His legs were unsteady, and he thought: "Shit, what's happening to me?" He felt no pain, as though there were no time for that. The light which had been receding so quickly was soon just a tiny dot. And then there was total darkness. It was gone, as though it had never existed. Arduo the Portuguese, who was called Playboy by the boys in the group because of his particular

predilection for fine fragrances, but also because of his looks, ran over to him quickly and pulled him behind the large cliff. Then the Algerian, Ali Oui, assumed control of communications and the action itself, and then reported briefly to the commander: “The boss is hit.” And added: “Seriously”, because he saw that Ante’s legs were in extreme convulsions.

Meanwhile, the fifth battle unit hit the enemy hard from the flank, destroying their nest of grenade launchers and automatic weapons. The commander called for an air strike at the same time. The *Gazelles* attacked like hyenas on dead animals, and in less than a half hour they had finished their bloody work. Only twelve Chadians who had surrendered at the very end survived.

Then the medics arrived. Two other commandos had also been wounded, both from the first and second unit. But Ante had the worst of it. A sniper had hit him in the head, but fortunately only on the outer side of his skull. But the blow had been so powerful that his skull had cracked, and bone slivers had gone into the wound. He was in a coma for over 24 hours. The first time he was operated on in a French military hospital in N’Djamena, and the second time, after a few days, in Paris.

Later, when he regained consciousness and had recuperated a little, he wondered whether he had survived due to the fact that he had not been wearing a helmet but a woolen, masked cap pulled down over his ears. If he had been wearing a helmet, the bullet would have penetrated and then, due to loss of trajectory, changed direction and ended up in the

skull. Like a wire pushed into a ball of clay that bends against the clay's resistance, going deeper and deeper into the skull.

He hadn't been wearing glasses or a helmet, and a lot of his colleagues hadn't either. They felt freer without them. Once you become accustomed to a helmet, you can't go without it anymore. You have the feeling that your head is somehow more fragile and vulnerable. To drafts and cold. Everything else is just the will of God.

Taking a new path?

His recovery took several months. The numerous doctors' examinations were hardest for Ante, but he endured them like a child who endures waiting, knowing he will be rewarded at the end with a favorite toy. His wound had healed and his hair had grown back, covering more and more the scar that began about two centimeters above his left temple and ended right at his ear. There was no more bone where the bullet had hit, just skin and tissue the size of a fingertip.

At first he had slight headaches, because he had suffered a concussion as a result of the heavy blow, but the pain lessened every day. His former strength and desire for action began to return. He viewed his wounds as a completely natural event. Just as he had not been particularly moved in similar situations when this or something far worse had happened to one of his colleagues. It was just a part of the soldier's life, an everyday

occurrence, and that's that. A bullet in the head, so what? He could hardly wait to return to his unit and to go into a new action. They gave him a purpose.

He had been a legionnaire for seven years already, completing difficult training and many special courses and schools. If he were to add it all up, he had spent at least three years just learning the secrets of the military trade. And he had made it to the top; he had become a commando. And then gone a step further: earned a diploma as commando instructor! What more could he ask for? He didn't ask himself this question, because he knew that what you do in action is most important, on the battlefield. That is where you prove himself, where you see what you know and what you have learned. What you're made of. Here your life is up for grabs, success and failure; here you confront antagonists who are also betting everything they have on all or nothing. There's no theorizing here, no pretty words or good intentions. Here the rules of another truth apply, here Fate tempts man, leaves him hanging or smiles upon him. Here you are what you are, not what you think you are or want to become. Here you are Ante Gotovina, Ali Oui or Playboy, to your very last nerve.

The doctors finally told him that he would not be able to return to the special detachment, which meant into battle, because a sudden change in blood pressure during a parachute jump or a dive at greater depths could harm him. Maybe nothing would happen, maybe the risk was very small. But it was a risk the Legion did not want to take.

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“You could stay a little longer in Paris. Maybe you would like it”, Monique would say as she charmed him during these days with her voice and captivating ideas, which always caused him to say: “No wonder you are so successful in business.” Then she would smile at that and answer a little coquettishly: “If my good husband had not left me all these business obligations, I might have ended up in the Legion myself.” And then she would repeat: “Really, why don’t you just give it a try?” Ante would look at her the way a polite customer would respond to a store clerk telling him in an incomprehensible language that the cheaper chocolates were on another shelf. He thought the doctors were wrong. Maybe they were just testing him to see how he would react. Or didn’t believe him that he was not psychologically impaired, or thought that if someone threw a snowball at him, he would automatically protect his head with his hands. Especially the left side.

But the time was passing more slowly than he expected and he started thinking more and more about that possibility; maybe he would not be returning to the special detachment. But even this eventuality did not affect him that greatly. He had learned that it is not wise to resist Fate. Or try to head it off, or lag behind it on purpose. Everything has its season. The Pakostan priest had said it was all God’s will, and all the teachings were designed to bring man to this realization. Sadness is then less frightening and happiness cannot seduce us.

With these feelings in mind, he went out to confront what awaited him. When Monique started making too many plans, he would focus on the sound of her voice, surrendering to its melody, not thinking of anything else. After all, what kind of soldier would he be if he thought about and weighed everything too much, got caught up in the pros and cons. Daydreaming was something else! And was there anything more beautiful than soldiers' fantasies? Than Monique, when he would take her to the desert with him in his daydreams, after the whiz of the bullets had ceased and the wind had died down, returning peace to the sands?

He took his time and didn't worry about it too much. He followed his intuition. The same one that had whispered to him in Abidjan what he should do when the executioner was following him. And had told him to go straight ahead.

Love in Cartagena

The *Playa d'inglese* stretches out forty kilometers from Las Palmas. This sand beach, about 12 kilometers long and dotted with numerous hotels, is a favorite vacation spot of the Europeans. The Germans were especially crazy about the Gran Canaria, because of its Spanish hospitality and nearness to Africa, whose breath stokes fantasy and passion better than any Bavarian beer.

The little settlement of San Augustin was ensconced at the edge of the *Playa d'inglese*. A former captain lived there and ran a sailing school. His name was Mateo, he was 65

years old but incredibly quick and agile on a boat, and also very strong for his years. His friends called him eagle because of his hooked and distinctive nose, which gave his bony, deeply-tanned face a certain aristocratic expression. Women loved him in spite of his years because he possessed a mysterious attraction.

He was skinny and tall, with gray eyes that left the impression of having been blue but were faded from the fierce winds. Mateo adored sailboats, and at the same time despised the big trans-oceanic boats on which he had spent his whole life. He believed they destroyed the sea, and that they were monsters in comparison with sailboats, which represented an alliance of nature and human goodness. At any rate, he was an excellent skipper.

After Ante arrived at the Grand Canaries and San Augustin and had rented a small apartment, Mateo and his school were his favorite places to hang out. He was completely taken with the great majesty of the sea. Mateo was a strict but wonderful teacher, and the winds on the Canary Islands were very similar to the maestral. Only they were stronger, just as the ocean was more immense. Ante sailed for a full six months, enjoying the sea and learning new skills, feeling like he had resurrected the charm of an old love which had now flamed into a new passion.

He was still on sick leave, though he had recovered remarkably well. He joined the parachuting club there and jumped again; he even dove, but it was clear to him that he was finished with the Legion. He knew he wouldn't be able to participate in operations

units of the special forces, that it was over forever. And he accepted this like a soldier, without emotion, without any inner turmoil or discussion.

When they called him to Aubagne before his departure for the Canary Islands, they had not told him this in so many words, but it was clear to him, because they proposed that he begin learning Spanish. He assented as though this were just another jump from the plane. First he thought it would be best to be in Barcelona or Madrid, but he only stayed there a few days. Then certain “island genes” came to life within him, and he decided he wanted to go to some island. And then there he was, on the Grand Canaries, not thinking about anything, enjoying life, like in *Dembeliji*, one of Brueghel’s exotic lands.

By day he sailed with Mateo, and at night they went with the Tamarindo Hotel director to boisterous parties. At one of these he met a charming professor who worked at a high school in Las Palmas and who helped him learn Spanish more quickly and pleasantly.

At the end of the year he was asked to return to France to the personnel office in Aubagne. An official of the Foreign Legion was waiting for him, and asked: “How was it, are you recuperated? And the language? Have you learned it well?” And then he pressed an envelope into his hand, and with a warm smile which barely masked a cold, military “farewell”, told him: “Report with this to the Ministry of Defense in Paris!”

It was now clear that his career with the Legion was officially over and that he was being offered work in the Department of Overseas Countries, which was tasked with military

cooperation with French-speaking countries or countries which were important or of interest to Paris. He was to work as an instructor of the special forces (commandos) in Central and Latin America, Guatemala, Colombia, and Paraguay. He accepted without hesitation. After all, he had learned Spanish and he had never been over there before.

At the end of 1982 he started off to his first assignment in Guatemala with six other colleagues, four of whom he knew from before. All were given pseudonyms, and Ante became Toni Moremante and also the head of the entire unit responsible for contacts in and the trip to Guatemala.

These assignments were usually undertaken in strict secrecy, and they usually traveled individually. But Ante wanted them to travel together this time. They were to stay in Guatemala for a year and he wanted everyone to get acquainted during the trip, become accustomed to one another. Besides, it was the end of the year, and that meant the winds on the Atlantic were more advantageous. Mateo had a sailboat ready and didn't want to miss this opportunity. 5000 miles from Las Palmas to Cartagena to Colombia!

So one night when the winds were calm and the sea quiet, the old skipper and the seven special forces instructors boarded the Scorpion, which was 72 feet long and had two powerful masts. Mateo thought he was sailing some carefree, European students who had collected sufficient courage and money to make the 22 day trip, but the seven didn't care how long it took because they had plenty of time. Only Ante knew why they were going to Cartagena, a typical Mediterranean town on the coast of South America.

He wanted to sail into the harbor Columbus had sailed into a half century before and where there was still a fortress from this time, with old cannons peeking out from the walls like copper pistols. And then there were the wooden balconies of the Spanish houses which transform the town with their lively colors into a strange aquarelle, and the narrow streets which climb up and down, cutting through the entire city. From them you can hear Andalusian music and the clicks of seductive dancers' high heels.

While he was on the Scorpion, enjoying the trepidation of his colleagues who had discovered on the open sea the charms and attractions of land, he had no idea that Fate was about to embrace him in Cartagena. That he would meet Ximena there, a girl who had come to the Colombian town from Columbus' town from Bogota to have fun and amuse herself.

She was seventeen years old with long, black, curly hair which reached down to her waist when she had it in a pony tail. Her eyes were round and black as coal, with long eyelashes and eyebrows just as black and expressive. But her skin was very white, barely touched by the sun, which gave her face an exotic but gentle appearance.

The first time Ante saw her in a coffee shop in the town center, her delicate hands, full mouth, and small nose caught his eye. She gave the impression of being an only child, a bit spoiled and capricious, but soft and generous in the depths of her soul. She came from an old Spanish family that had lived for three centuries in Colombia and was very

wealthy. Her father, who adored Ximena, had a big building firm, and her grandfather two huge ranches, the biggest of which bordered on Brazil; it took him more than three days to ride through it. He also had about 4000 cattle and a respectable stable of horses.

That morning Ante was reading some Argentine newspapers. He had made an agreement with some colleagues to split up and meet again in Cartagena in about 25 days at the command site in Guatemala. Ximena had come into the café barefoot, carrying sandals in her hand and wearing a flowered, see-through dress. She sat at a neighboring table, and when she noticed Ante, started to observe him with downcast eyes so that he would not notice.

She immediately saw that he was watching her, as though enchanted by her. Women in Latin America like nothing better than this. Regardless of how old the man was, 17 or 60. The admiration of every man is equally valuable and pleases in the same manner; you are never diminished by beauty or self-admiration. This is a social norm, an embodiment of the philosophy that beauty is the best recommendation in the world.

But Ximena liked more than just Ante's enchantment; she liked him, this strong and vibrant man whose face exuded a certain carefreeness and humor, though he was not smiling, and lust for life. It was love at first sight, full of the kind of passion and loyalty which perhaps only Latin American women are capable of, who go the full nine yards when they give themselves, without hesitation or thought.

He spent three weeks with Ximena in Columbus' city. But he didn't reveal who he was to her. For her he was Toni Moremante, who had come from France to spend some time and who would afterward return to Europe. But it was hard for him to go, to leave this young woman. He was almost late to Guatemala because he wanted to spend every second he had with her. When he got there, a world such as he had never seen before, even in Africa, awaited him.

Cockroaches

Guatemala was dominated by Indios and mulattos, but there were also Creoles, whites, and blacks. The official language was Spanish, but the Indios spoke mostly a dialect of Majan. Corn, rice, bananas, and coffee were the main staples. The climate was tropical and this was perhaps the reason why people were a little different in this Central American country. As though Nature had mixed more good up in them, but also more evil, than in Europe or in Africa. They could be very likeable, open and accessible. It was enough just to smile at someone you had seen for the first time for him to return that friendship and keep you company for the whole evening. He would go wherever you wanted, have dinner, chase women, or get drunk. In the morning when you parted ways, he would say "Adios, amigo" and you'd never see him again. But the memory of this extraordinary type of person you could find only between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean sea would stay with you.

This mixture of races and cultures also injects a terrible darkness into the people. When they allow it to take over, they can become very dangerous and cruel. At such moments, life is worth nothing. Compared to them, Europeans and Africans are rank amateurs. When an African becomes angry, when he wants to hurt someone or commit a crime, anyone with a little experience can see this; his face turns ashen gray, and his eyes get red. But with the Guatemalans, Salvadorans, or Hondurans you always have to be careful. They can stab you with a smile on their face and a look in their eyes which suggests casualness, even a strange friendship and connection to their victim.

If the guerrillas caught a government soldier, or the other way around, they would torture him in the most extreme and cruel manner: they would stick a knife in his stomach and turn it slowly to the right, making a circle of a few degrees. Then they would return it back to the initial position. This way, air would go into the wound and stomach, and the pains caused by the air were as unimaginable as the cruelty that had produced them. It would take the victim hours to die in the worst agony, accompanied by looks from the executioner whose capacity for loathing could certainly not have come from an omniscient God.

Europeans became acquainted with these horrors during the First World War when soldiers of both defeated sides used bayonets with grooves along the length of the blade that let air into the wounded body as it was stabbed. They were later banned by international convention, but in the jungle they were prized as a tool and also as a confirmation of certain diabolical drives.

When they wanted to squeeze important information from a prisoner, the Guatemalans would tie him up and place a big, black spider on his chest. These spiders were extremely poisonous, and had stingers on their stomach that wound the victim as they crawl, injecting poison into the wound. Besides being disgusting and terrifying, they also cause extreme physical pain, not giving the body or the mind a moment's peace. The executioner would stand behind the victim with a smiling face and a syringe in his hand containing serum. The victim knows this, and thus must decide between life and death, which makes the suffering even more unendurable. After all, in spite of the inhuman pain, nothing is guaranteed. Even if he gets the information he wants, the executioner can still just turn and go, leaving the spider to finish its work.

Ante was known to ask what it was in these people that could transform them into such monsters. Or how these monsters could quickly change into refined and smiling guys, the kind you could meet in any restaurant and never think for a moment that they had held back a live-saving injection from some poor soul only an hour earlier. They were completely ingratiating, smiling, without any visible scars of from unhappiness and suffering they leave behind.

In time he began to look at it fatalistically, saying how it was an inescapable side of human nature. The dark and evil in a person was just as real and unavoidable as the bright and noble side. It would be stupid to deny that, or to claim that people were at one time much worse or more brutal than today. On the contrary. The world is always the

same in relation to the amount of good and evil. Only ways of living are different. But the darkness in man lives and bursts forth in atom bombs and psychological terror the same way it was once embodied by the brutalities of Attila the Hun or the Normans.

Is this evil the price we pay for the bright, shiny goodness one sees looking at a small child or an elderly person who meets death calmly and quietly? Ante didn't know the answer, but he somehow believed that man, in spite of everything, must suppress evil and strive for the good and the light, because this is human and there is no other way.

Succumbing to the illusion that it is possible to eradicate evil would be the same as believing that it is possible to change human nature. He had already learned that in Europe and in Africa. The world, so joyful and so cruel, had shown him that as well.

Sometimes he would say: "Heaven and hell exist in people's minds and nowhere else!" And then he would be overwhelmed by pessimism, which he would call *universal sorrow*. These were times when he would feel that dying would be a liberation from everything: the human hell in his mind, the general misery and sadness that raged over the world, and from life, which was only a nightmare, a passing and inconsequential little tale. But the fighter in him would not let himself be broken. A week with Ximena was like a prize for all the suffering and evil, a gift from God, a return to the world of innocence and beauty, health and energy. To a world that had more than just this bad side.

He had already been a special forces instructor for two months in the training center, which was located 70 kilometers from the main city of Guatemala in a forested and well-protected area. He often went into the jungle for survival training and close range battle practice. There were American and British instructors on the base in addition to the French. About twenty of them.

Every one of these countries had some interests there, especially the Americans. The Cold War had reached another high point, and the western elite was disturbed about the Marxist guerrillas and dangerous infiltration by the competing military political bloc. Ante and his men were given only one assignment: train and drill the government forces there to do battle against the extremists. They also profited by this. They learned things they would not have learned in Europe: how to defend themselves against the bites of deadly mosquitoes, poisonous snakes, and spiders; how to set clever traps and make poison from seemingly harmless leaves; how to use the same leaves as medicine in life and death situations; how to heal wounds caused by huge leeches; and how to survive tropical fever.

After these two months, he went into town for the first time to the quarter where soldiers, exhausted by iron discipline and hard work, were usually to be found. He was hanging out in one of the dim bars and *public houses* when the police burst in. It was a raid, and nobody knew who was behind it or why it had been initiated. At any rate, they arrested him and took him to the police station. They confiscated his papers, money, and everything else, and then began to interrogate him in the cellar.

“What is your name, where did you come from and what are you doing in Guatemala, who are you in contact with?...” a bearded policeman in a white shirt with rolled up sleeves repeated. Ante always gave the same answer: “My name is Toni Moremante, from France, I am just passing through and don’t know anybody.” As he said this, the bearded policeman lightly hit his left palm with a wooden bat, repeating: “Oh, really, really?” Then he gestured to two others, who jumped on Ante like panthers, laying him on his stomach on a hard, wooden bench so that his head was hanging down in the air and his faced turned toward the floor. His thighs were pressed against the backrest, and his knees vertical in the air, with his legs bound around his ankles by rope and attached to his neck, his hands below on the bench. The bearded man asked him once again what his name was, changing the tone of his voice threateningly, and when Ante again answered “Toni Moremante”, the other two began to hit him on the soles of his feet with wooden bats. The pain was agonizing and indescribable. He lost consciousness three times. At first it seemed that something had burst in his head from the powerful blows, and then the pain began to spread toward his knees, and, as though it had found refuge there, dug into his bones like a harpoon. It would abate for a moment and then spread toward the hips and then into the nerves of his neck. Finally he felt a blunt and horrible pain in the back of his head. With every blow the pain would return, and it got to the point where he longed to lose consciousness; it was liberating and would give him a respite without which, it seemed to him, his heart would explode. When he came to again, he had the feeling he was hovering over some chasm, and that the blows on his soles had assumed some strange coolness that decreased their strength. Then he heard disembodied voices

and felt the pain even more intensely; when it became unendurable, he would disappear again into that nothingness.

All this lasted about five and a half hours. And then they put him into some basement cell. He couldn't stand up, but had to drag his feet behind him as they carried him, holding him below his waist. He felt like a wounded animal dragging a half-dead body behind it.

They threw him onto the straw and left him there for two weeks. At first he couldn't think at all, as he had been so badly beaten, but later, when he began to recover, he was overcome with fear. He didn't know why he was there, whether it had been a mistake or some conscious, planned retaliation.

They interrogated him two more times, asked him if anyone knew him, if he had friends. He repeated again and again that he was just passing through, that he didn't know anybody. He asked them to give him a telephone so he could call the base, but they refused, telling him to give them the number so they could call for him. He declined, so they threw him in the cell again.

The uncertainty began to weigh on him more and more. He began to have trouble breathing and at times it seemed he would detonate like a bomb. The cell was small and had an opening at the top, at about ground level, through which a small ray of light about 15 by maybe 60 centimeters shone in. There was nothing else in the cell but straw, dirty

walls, and blood and saliva smears. The top of the cell had been painted over but reeked of rot and dankness. The floor was stone, gray and worn . Opposite from the light opening were heavy, wooden doors with peepholes, and at the bottom a transom through which food was passed: bread, water, and some indescribable soup with vegetables and tiny pieces of meat.

His despair became worse, and he started talking to himself out loud, how he had no luck, how he could at least have been allowed to live a bit longer and enjoy his life. Lively images of all the enticing scenes from his life began to return to him, his Ximena, her bright, black eyes and full mouth, and her hands that held him so tightly, as though she wanted to keep him all for herself. And then the sea and sailing, and Serge...At night he dreamt that he was flying above the sea, an image that filled him with inexpressible joy. But waking up was horrible, and reality even worse.

Then one day he locked his gaze on some cockroaches which were everywhere and which emerged from and returned to their refuges at specifically designated times. They seemed friendly somehow, prettier, larger, and healthier than the ones he remembered from his childhood. He looked upon them benevolently and they began to regard him in the same way. Soon he became certain of their affection and began to pet them with his finger, tell them stories and, as though they felt solidarity with him, they began to react in the same way, almost cuddling with him.

Three cockroaches were especially devoted. He learned to recognize them by size and behavior. As time went on, all of them became friends and he could even induce them to race with each other. He would scrape a little chalk from the wall which with the help of a little saliva he made into a paste. Then mix it with a little piece of straw and mark the cockroaches with it. One or two dots on the back, depending. He would draw a line a meter away on the floor and give the signal to start. The boys ran full speed, the largest one usually winning. Ante praised them, gave them something to eat, and when they were tired they would run back to their refuges and he would immediately fall asleep, able to breathe better. They would appear again the next day, the dots on their backs a bit faded.

After fifteen days, when he had almost recovered, the guards came for him and said: “You’re leaving!” He rose up on the straw, turned toward the door and stopped, looking in the direction of his little friends, telling them: “Adios, and watch out you don’t get stepped on here!” The guards thought he’d gone a bit nuts because of his lengthy isolation, so they put him under the shower right away. His things were returned to him: a watch, a golden chain with a cross, and money. About a thousand dollars, exactly half what he had had when he was arrested. He was then taken to *el coronella*, the unlikable, fat busybody weighing 130 kilos, who was sunk like a side of beef in a big chair, his legs spread across the table to help him breathe.

But he was still panting like a dog in the heat, squinting like a little pig whose eyes radiated evil in spite of his efforts to pretend he was well-disposed toward Ante.

“Signore, why didn’t you tell us what you were doing in our country?” Why did you hide that, since you know in the end we are always going to find out?” he said to Ante as he entered the room. Then he smiled shrewdly, offering him a cigarette, which Ante refused, and continued: “What you have gone through was ugly, but I wish you a pleasant stay in our beautiful country and I am sure you will have many wonderful and happy moments here.” Ante said nothing, he just asked for a glass of water. When he had drunk the water, *el coronello* gave him the sign that he could go, and told him: “If you need anything, I am here, just give me a call.” “I hope to God we never meet again” Ante answered somewhat ironically. This sounded like a vague threat, and the man who was intimately acquainted with all kinds of trouble gave a big smile in response.

Wife and daughter

At the end of 1983, Ante had another piece of bad luck. He caught tropical fever somewhere in the jungle, near the biggest river in Guatemala, the Motagua. First he began to feel weak, and then broke out in a high fever accompanied by heavy sweats, vomiting, and diarrhea. Then came pain in his joints, stomach, and intestines. He melted like snow in the sun, and lost 12 kilos in only ten days. He couldn’t eat anything, because as soon as he put something in his mouth, he would throw it up again. He languished, as though his life force were extinguished, but the worst was the uncontrollable chattering of his teeth. His lower jawbone worked as though it were plugged into an electric socket, and his facial muscles twitched so much from the chattering and clenching that he felt like they would turn to stone and shatter into a

thousand pieces. Worst of all was that his eyes almost fell out from the constant shaking of his head. He spent some horrible days in the jungle before they finally took him to the hospital where they pumped him with infusions and medicine. He hovered there between life and death. Ultimately, he was saved by the coca leaves he chewed, sucking from them their precious juice. The Incas considered the coca a holy plant, and still today Indians from the Andes chew its leaves, mixed together with lime or plant potash. In this way they curb their appetites and exhaustion and increase their work output. Ante used *methyl ester benzoilekgonin*, which they squeezed from the coca leaves as an anesthetic to deaden his jaw muscles so that he could halt the intolerable and life-threatening chattering and shaking of his head. It also gave him nourishment. He still had hallucinations in which he saw himself surrounded by worms and snakes; sometimes he turned into them himself or was eaten up by them or ate them, but he survived. He remembered the bitter taste of the juice from these light green leaves, which otherwise have small greenish blossoms that produce red blooms about a centimeter long.

After several weeks he left the hospital, skinny as a starving greyhound and looking like someone who has escaped death or great suffering at the very last minute. He called Ximena and told her to come to Bogota. She said she could hardly wait to see him and that she had something important to tell him.

When he arrived in the town snuggled under the sky, where the days were hot and the nights cold, his love told him she was pregnant and he answered that he was happy and wanted to marry her. Her father Juan, who was tall, round and a bit bald, and who

resembled his father Andreas but seemed a bit more weary, didn't want to even consider giving his daughter away to someone named Toni Moremante.

Actually, Ante had already told Ximena his real name, that he was Croatian, had been in the Foreign Legion, and was now a special forces instructor for the French Ministry of Defense. But that was their secret, and though father Juan perhaps sensed this, it only increased his antipathy toward the young man who would come and go with secretive eyes, and who felt almost the same antipathy toward him. "No, no, and no!" he would yell out whenever his daughter would tell him she was going to get married anyway.

Then she went one day to her father and told him: "OK, if that's the way it is, then I am going to kill myself!" Her father couldn't believe his ears, thought she was joking, but when he looked her in the eyes he saw a cold and dangerous determination and immediately backed down.

Ante and Ximena got married without a lot of fuss and went off to Cartagena, where she delivered him a daughter several months later, also named Ximena. Ante named her after her mother, who had also been young, passionate, and loyal, and whom he loved probably more than he knew.

He never could establish a good connection with father Juan. It was a kind of permanent "dead in the water" relationship. But he forged a real friendship with grandfather Andreas, which lasted until the death of the old boy, who had been in better shape than

his own son and had been able at 65 years of age to ride for hours. Perhaps this man who had loved nature and had ranches more as a hobby than from necessity, saw in this young, adventurous warrior someone who represented a part of his lost youth? Or had never himself experienced true adventure? At any rate, the two were true partners in this old, Spanish family where passion, love, envy, generosity, and spitefulness were bound together in the web of life by mutual interests.

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Ximena, Ante, and two other young married couples were having dinner in a fancy restaurant in Bogota. They had a nice meal and were drinking red wine from large, oval glasses. Then suddenly, as though someone was intentionally trying to ruin the atmosphere, a woman of rare beauty came into the room. She was voluptuous and especially provocative because of her deep décolletage and slit up her dress which ended at her right thigh. The entire restaurant gaped at her when she walked in. As though an invisible conductor had just tapped his wand on the podium. The woman, apparently conscious of her charms, sat down at the table next to Ximena and Ante. She crossed her legs so that the slit opened more widely, and as though none of this concerned her at all, began to talk to the older man who had accompanied her and who looked like an art dealer accustomed to consorting with masterpieces. Ante looked at this dark beauty one more time, unconsciously, as though someone were pulling him by the ear and making him turn around. And then, not really knowing why, he looked a third time.

Ximena took her wine glass, stood up, and said: “Well, that did it.” She poured the wine on his pants, carefully, the way some people water flowers when they don’t want it to spill over the pot. And then she left the restaurant like the Furies. Ante was flabbergasted, not even realizing for a moment what had happened. He took a napkin and quickly wiped off his pants, and then, shamed the way only Latin Americans can do it, ran after her. As he left her he heard the older man sitting with the beauty say: “That’s life, man!”

It was already night and getting colder and colder. Ximena had taken off her shoes and run home barefoot with her husband following her, mad as a hornet. When he caught up to her, they were already in the garden of her father’s villa. It was not their first argument. They loved just as passionately as they fought. Sometimes over the smallest things. And then the destiny of a spoiled only child who always had to have her way would spill out of this passionate woman. A woman whose father always gave in to her. Sometimes she wouldn’t talk to her husband for three days if she had really been angry, and he couldn’t understand this. It was hard for him to endure and he feared such scenes.

Now he was in this situation again; he tried to explain, he even yelled at her a little. Then, with a speed that surprised him, she climbed up the avocado tree like a frightened squirrel. And refused to speak. She wouldn’t speak a word and refused to respond to his request that she climb down; she would catch a cold, she could fall! She just remained silent, her teeth chattering in the cold night. Ante, not knowing what to do, tried several times to climb up the tree to get her down. But then she would climb even higher to get

away from him, and out of fear that she would fall, he gave up this idea. Nothing was helping. When he was in complete despair, he suddenly thought of grandfather Andreas. He ran to the telephone, called him, and told him Ximena was up in the avocado tree and would not come down; she would freeze, she might fall. The grandfather said: “OK, wait for me, I’m on my way.” He got into his van, driving faster than usual the 120 kilometers separating his house from his son’s villa in Bogota.

When he arrived two hours later, Ximena was still in the tree, and Ante, also frozen, cried out: “She could have been killed, frozen, gotten sick.” A grin broke out on he grandfather’s bony face, as though he felt sorry for Ante: “You don’t know women, nothing will happen to them; you’d get sick before she would!” Then he whispered to his granddaughter to come down, which she did immediately. A half hour later she was in bed sleeping soundly with a smile on her face, like a child who had lost a toy, but had been given an even better, more beautiful one in exchange.

From that time on, Ante and the grandfather were partners; in the saddle, when they would ride for days across the endless Colombian prairies, as well as in family matters. The grandfather would give him a signal when it was most advantageous to buy shares in his son’s large and successful construction business. He used this information discreetly and in time had bought 12% of the shares. When he bequeathed them in a formal contract to his daughter, Ximena, his father-in-law finally softened up. “I’m glad he did this, he’s shown he’s an honest and principled man” he told his daughter in a tone more consoling than apologetic.

Home again

Everything and nothing had changed in Ante's life. He was married and had a family again after many years. But he remained a professional soldier: special forces instructor. He went away for months to Africa, the Central African Republic, and Gabon, and then would return for a short time to Colombia and to work in Paraguay.

In the mid 1980s in Abidjan – a place to which he was sentimentally attached - he met a robust old man who left a very positive impression on him. Of course you could never be sure how old someone was in Africa, especially if the person was in good shape. It was just as hard to penetrate his character.

The old man was characterized far and wide as a bloodthirsty dictator, though he had very expressive, benevolent facial features, and lively and curious eyes which were more intelligent than cruel. Maybe his height created this impression, because it would have been hard to imagine such a small person possessing the vast *criminal energies* that had been attributed to him. One thing that was true was that this already aging colonel, who had come to power in the Central African Republic in the mid 1960s in a putsch, had had himself declared *Emperor* in the Napoleonic style. Whether this was an act of madness or simply a mark of respect toward the famous French military leader was not always clear. At any rate, the man had a bad reputation – incited in large part by the multinational companies – but a kind face, and his name was Jean Bedel Bokassa.

Bokassa was sitting with a French officer in an opulent African restaurant, *Tomat*, in the center of Abidjan. The restaurant had a large menu, from African to European specialties, and it was frequented by ministers and others with deep pockets and strong social connections. He had already been in exile for several years and enjoyed forging new friendships, partly due to boredom but also because of his natural openness. Especially with soldiers, and with the exception of women and certain other luxuries, there was nothing he valued more than a true soldier. After all, he had been a soldier himself, and as such had ousted from power the legally elected president of the country, David Dack, on New Year's Day, 1966.

“Your Excellency, how are you?” Ante asked him when he was introduced to the elderly dictator. “How can an old man like me be?” Bokassa answered, smiling in such a way as to discount what he had just said. And then asked Ante: “How is the soldier life?” The newcomer answered: “It's whatever others want it to be.”

Then they had a drink together, exchanged business cards and spent time together off and on for the next two months. Bokassa was interesting to Ante because through him he was able to become acquainted to that part of Africa which was usually hidden to a soldier's eyes. Bokassa was a real encyclopedia.

He knew about all the African leaders and intellectuals, so he enjoyed listening to him. And Bokassa was pleased that a white soldier took pleasure listening to an African

talking about the freedom of his country, his wish that Africa free itself from all colonial and neo-colonial chains, African democracy, and the good guy Sengor, who was the president of the Ivory Coast. And especially about all the evil he had had to endure, including the story about how he had plundered the country when he had fled, taking a mountain of diamonds with him.

At times Bokassa would say: “Oh, you’re not a real *tubabu*, no, you’re not!” And Ante really didn’t act like a true white person, like a *tubaba*; on informal occasions he would even wear a *dzelaba* and enjoy the relaxed atmosphere that usually reigned in the *Stop* hotel, which they often frequented. The feasts of cold, exotic fruit, which were reminiscent of the Roman bacchanalia, were not all they enjoyed. In those days, the aging and abandoned African dictator would repress his nostalgia for the past and act with youthful abandon; and Ante became well acquainted with the beauty and riches of the world.

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Paraguay was a country with a rain forest on its triangle with Brazil and Argentina, and almost Texas-style prairies in the north. Ante was especially taken by the spectacular waterfalls of Kataratas, which were the second largest in the world after the Niagara Falls, created by the Parana and Paraguay rivers near Resistencija and Corrietes. Here he spent many exhausting but pleasant years until his return to Croatia in 1991. And went as often as possible to Bogota. He also learned here the Indian language, Guarana, which was spoken by 80% of the population, though Spanish was the official language. Not

perfectly, but enough to be able to make himself understood. It would have been more accurate to say he had learned to whistle talk, because how you whistle determines the meaning of the word. So a lot could be said with few words, as long as one knew how to change the intonation. He also went often to Argentina from Paraguay, especially to the town of Iguaca in the Misiones area, right on the border. He liked to sit there in a pleasant café on the river, reading newspapers and enjoying being alone.

Around the end of the 1980s, he was in the café again, the name of which he had never registered. Sitting and reading the newspapers. And then he looked up by chance and saw a plaque “El gato Branko.” Branko the cat, he repeated under his breath, as though he wanted to be certain he had seen correctly. He turned to the left and right looking for a witness, thinking: “Could it be possible there are some of my people in this outpost?”

A half hour later three older gentlemen entered the café, one carrying a cane. They were dressed in light and elegant suits with hats to match, and gave the impression of being well-situated and gracious. They were speaking some language that seemed to ring a vague bell in Ante’s mind; now and then he would recognize a tone, an intonation. This aroused his curiosity and he began to listen more closely, almost astounded. The older gentlemen were speaking the language of his childhood; the dialect was an older one from Dalmatia, which could still be heard on some of the islands, but a language he understood well. Right here in the Misiones, for God’s sake! Unbelievable!

The man with the cane, Stipe, who was from the island of Brac, noticed Ante staring at him as though he were one of the wonders of the world, and asked him in Spanish: “Sir, are you from here?” Ante said no, that he was from Europe, and then Stipe asked: “Are you one of us?” “Yes,” he answered, and began to speak in his native language, a bit unsure, but filled with joy and satisfaction. Like a man who had by sheer chance found a long-lost treasure. Later they had lunch together, relating various events from their homeland. Though Ante hadn’t been home for more than fifteen years, his news was relatively fresh to them since they hadn’t been in Croatia for more than 50-60 years. All of these old boys were married to Argentinians, and talked about Croatia more as the land of their fathers and grandfathers. But they spoke a language they had learned in their childhood and because of this, Ante visited Stipe many more times at his farm in Misiones area, an outpost between Paraguay on one side and Brazil on the other.

Here he got the news about the massacre of Croatian policemen in Borovo Selo in the spring of 1991. And though he had lived outside Croatia for more than twenty years and wasn’t particularly interested in politics, the news still hit him right in the heart. As though he had lost someone dear to him, someone with whom he had lost contact; and now that something like this had happened, it was not an anonymous event, it was connected to something precious to him. He began to follow CNN and the newspapers more closely, and asked himself: “If a war is starting, can I, a professional soldier, stay on the sidelines? Say it doesn’t concern me?” The desire to return flamed more brightly within him, to at least “check out the situation.” “My mother’s grave is there, and my father, sister Anica, and brothers..I could at least see them,” he told himself.

He felt for the first time the need to connect with Croatians in Argentina in order to learn more about events in Croatia. He even went to Buenos Aires, to the Croatian diaspora organization. There they told him Yugoslavia was disintegrating, that everything was coming to a head, and that an independent Croatian state was going to be realized. He started to “feel political” for the first time, think about something besides adventure and the military. He became more and more preoccupied and felt increased pressure to go “just to see what was happening.”

Time flew. He took care of all his paperwork and managed to spend two weeks with Ximena, little Ximena, and grandfather Andreas at his ranch in Colombia. Then he flew from Buenos Aires to Amsterdam, and on to Zagreb. The warrior had returned to the city where he had attended elementary school a long time ago. It was the beginning of June, 1991, the streets smelled of lime trees, and the air was heavy, like before an explosion.

Fighting iron with the heart

Ante took a taxi into Zagreb from the Pleso airport. He didn't speak to the taxi driver except to ask about a good hotel. He recommended the Palace, and Ante found himself a half hour later on Zrinjevac. He got out of the taxi with his scanty luggage, not carrying anything which would indicate that he was a professional soldier. He looked toward Jelacic Square, but didn't stay out on the sidewalk. He went quickly into the hotel,

leaving the clear, warm day behind. But also the humidity, which generated a heavy and almost tangible sense of dread.

He had already sensed an unusual atmosphere at the airport. It lacked the general boisterousness and excitement usually found at such places. Fear was radiating out from the people, creating from the warm and moist air a heavy cover which pressed down upon the city and its inhabitants. The Serbian rebellion had spread throughout Croatia and the Yugoslav National Army was squeezing it like a walnut in a nutcracker. The world had turned its head; diplomats were claiming that everything had been invented by journalists, that nothing was happening, that Yugoslavia should be saved.

But something was glimmering within the population, some hope that the worst wouldn't happen, that in the end someone powerful and good, or at least just, would come to their aid. Like the gentle giant in the fairy tales who steps in when the problem becomes too insurmountable for the protagonist.

This hope kept the anxiety at a distance, and though the people seemed somehow sunk into themselves, they were not lost or demoralized. They wanted to avoid trouble because they knew it would be hard to deal with, and were still unwilling to churn up the waters. He felt all this that day in Zagreb, he inhaled the pressure and heaviness in the air as he entered the Palace Hotel. But he was still happy to be back in his homeland again.

The first days he spent in the hotel, walking around the city and reading the newspapers. He listened to the news and gauged the situation. And became accustomed to his own language, which he hadn't spoken or heard but only carried within him for so many years, like a traveler who carries around his unpacked suitcases. And then one day he went to Vukovar Street, to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and reported as a volunteer. On the form he filled out, he wrote: "professional soldier". That brought him to the Parliament building, to Josip Perkovic and Gojko Susak.

He was greeted by the former with a smile and relative cordiality. The latter was grumpy, silent, and cold. With his characteristic eyebrows and deep lines on the face which created the first impression; but if you watched him closely, you would notice a certain suppressed vitality, perhaps restrained emotion, like a bell ringing in the distance, on its way but never arriving. When he heard that Ante had worked as a professional, Susak told Perkovic bluntly: "He's not going to Kumrovec. Send him to Lucic." This meant that Ante would not join the Zrinski, that is, the Frankopan unit, where most of the professional soldiers went, but would join the 1st Brigade Company of the National Guard which was just being formed and whose headquarters were on Sljeme, commanded by Josip Lucic.

He was immediately appointed head of the operations-training section of the 1st Brigade, which really meant that he was to create a surveillance-diversionary unit at the level of a company. But with whom? And with what? There was hardly any equipment, just the most rudimentary arms, a few anti-tank systems such as *hornets* and *wasps*, but no night

surveillance equipment, communications systems, or anything else that should comprise the equipment of such forces.

And the boys! They were volunteers from all social strata, a diverse group that had no conception of war, all as different as the suits they showed up in. The only thing they had in common was their desire to defend their homeland. Even though they were unaware of what that really meant. Lucic gave his blessing for Ante to begin mixing the dough without the yeast. On Sljeme, in the Union House and the Tomislav Dom, only 500 meters from the air routes of the Yugoslav National Army units who were still stationed there near the television transmitters.

Near the Union House he built an improvised polygon for training. It looked weird compared to the real polygons he had passed through. Later he trained others on them depending on the situation. In the time he had – and he didn't know how much that would be – he had to create surveillance-diversionaries which would lack the necessary equipment and weapons but who would in time have to oppose a military armed to the teeth, with professional cadres and a rare capability for brutal aggression.

For the first time he lacked what he needed. Standing before him were boys who were unequal to the task that awaited them. This worried him and caused him great anxiety in his daily activities. He therefore decided to drill without pause so that he could make something of these Croatian fighters in the time he had, which could have been that single day. So they could orient themselves on the ground, launch attacks and defenses

day and night, perform diversionary tasks, and look like real soldiers. Some couldn't endure this and left, but on Sljeme, everything was constantly in motion. A remarkable collective enthusiasm injected itself into the learning of these military skills.

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The Banja Luka corps, reinforced by the 63rd Parachute Brigade from Nis and composed of Serbian special forces and some military police, was concentrated between the left bank of the Sava and the Strug canal on the Stara Gradiska-Nova Varos line. This area was partly swampland and could easily be defended and controlled because of the steep bank of the canal, which was a natural obstacle and also afforded protection. The dense, Slavonian forest, the *Prasnik*, extended out about ten kilometers from the left bank, all the way to the Zagreb-Lipovac highway.

General Milan Uzelac, who commanded the Banja Luka Corps, planned to attack the Stara Gradiska-Okucani communications systems, thereby cutting through the Zagreb-Lipovac highway and joining up with parts of the ground forces of the Bjelovar garrison commanded by Colonel Milan Celeketic, who had taken position in the area of Pakrac and Okucani. The conditions would then be created to penetrate in the direction of Virovitica and divide Croatia into two parts. This plan had been formulated in Belgrade and the job was to have been made easier by the fact that the local Serbian population had armed itself to the teeth during the Yugoslav National Army retreat from Slovenia and was hungry for battle.

At the end of August, the 1st Brigade received orders to deploy to crisis areas to reinforce the local Croatian defense forces and police and to frustrate the planned attack of the Banja Luka corps. After surveying the terrain, manpower, and equipment, they were deployed to Nova Gradiska. Here the majority of forces was concentrated, waiting to be put into position. This had to be done discreetly, but under the highest security. One part of the brigade was placed in the *Motel* along the highway. The boys felt lucky, because the conditions were very good for war standards; there was water and a bathroom that worked, and the *Prasnik* forest was right nearby.

And then everything exploded in the blink of an eye. Early in the morning of the second day, two *migs* flew in and immediately dropped their deadly cargo. One bomb hit only human beings and nothing else. Dawn had broken, sunny and clear, with just a little fog remaining. The explosion blew apart the fog as well as the windows, which together with the frames blew off twisting through the air. The horrendous detonation that burst the eardrums and then immediately dispersed was replaced by the moans and cries of the wounded. The boys died like flies that had had no chance to fly. Fifty people were killed, and with them the commander of the unit. These were the moments, as many said later, that bravery fell victim to inexperience.

In spite of this, the 1st Brigade, under protection of night and the forest, succeeded in moving to the position Nova Gradiska-Novi Varos (the toll stations), and then to Bogicevci-*Prasnik* forest-Nova Varos. Thereafter, the surveillance-diversionaries began

night and day to penetrate the enemy zones and interrupt the attack preparations of General Uzelac's forces.

Ante participated in these actions. When they destroyed the Strug Bridge, he was leading 70 diversionaries, the most highly trained Sljeme fighters, who were weighted down with 150 kilos of explosives. The goal was to hit one of the bridges on the canal in order to prevent the penetration of enemy tanks and foot troops. They crossed through the forest on hard terrain full of ditches and cesspools. Ante intentionally chose bad weather: rain and fog, when visibility was at the worst and the enemy sluggish and gray from exhaustion. They had a native guide, without whom they would have had great difficulties finding the path. He was a local Serb named Stevo. A farmer, but also a hunter, and he knew every foot of the terrain just as well as his prey. He even resembled his prey. He was about fifty, and gave the impression of being tough and in shape. He was fast and agile, which could be seen in the way he moved. But also quiet and precise, letting his instincts guide him. His two sons were fighters in the 3rd Guard Brigades. One had been wounded seriously, remaining an invalid.

Ante went with Stevo, and the others followed in battle formation. When they arrived at the bridge between Novi Varos and Stara Gradiska, they laid the explosives quickly; an explosion followed, then a rumbling and crash of water. And their hearts were lighter. They weren't overly ecstatic because all their successes in these days were shadowed by the knowledge that Croatia was far inferior to Serbian tanks and technology.

But they had bought some time and postponed the worst. September was coming to an end, humid air was steaming out from the warm, Slavonian earth, and the forests smelled of this fecund heat. This is the day the 1st Brigade - comprised of the 3rd company of the 2nd unit for special assignments (Ante's surveillance-diversionaries, plus several native guides) - launched an attack on the pontoon bridge which was a bit closer than the other one that had been destroyed. From the direction of the village of Pivar through the *Prasnik* forest. According to plan, the attack, which had been formulated in the Nova Gradiska crisis center, was to take place at 6 p.m.

Ante and Jozo Milicevic arrived with their battle-ready forces - coming from three directions – about an hour before the attack, and took position about 70 meters from the canal. Intending to wait an hour and then surprise and overpower the enemy with full intensity. At this moment an officer of Ante's forces ran into the enemy camp, screaming hysterically: "Get ready quick, at 6 p.m. the Ustashis are coming to kill you!", adding: "Motherfucking Ustashis." His last words were lost in noise issuing from the canal, and then tank motors and the din of infantry weapons were heard. Thereafter followed cannon fire. Someone in the Croatian ranks yelled out: "Traitor", after which they began to retreat quickly. When they had moved far enough away, furious and disdainful curses could be heard: "We could all have been killed if that guy hadn't yelled so loud!" someone said in disbelief. They later learned that a Croatian in the crisis center in Nova Gradiska had told the Serbs the time of the planned attack. When they arrested him, they found that he had a brother in Okucani who was an officer in the Yugoslav National Army.

Ante had already been told in Zagreb to watch out where he went and what he did, because KOS and UDBA (Yugoslav secret services) were extremely active. Though the Parliament had proclaimed independence on June 25th, Croatia was in a kind of limbo because of pressure from the West, the Yugoslav Army on its back, Mesic and Mrkovic in Belgrade, and KOS and UDBA in Zagreb. He heard about the Spigelj affair and that this Croatian general had had to hide from enemy military police in his own country.

Ante took this seriously. So much so that he told nobody he was from Pakostan, but from Korcula. And he never contacted his father and brothers, fearing that they would be exposed to danger if he did. He figured there was time for that; now he had work to do.

But to experience such a betrayal! He could never have imagined that. It was sheer luck that they had avoided death. If they hadn't heard the order of the Serbian officer, they could all have been killed like rabbits in those few minutes.

The war in Croatia knew no rules in these days. And he quickly realized this. From then on, he launched actions the crisis center had planned for the morning in the evening instead, twelve hours earlier, and told nobody about it. He liberated the village of Gredane in this manner. There he took many enemy soldiers prisoner, and one of them, a officer about thirty years old who had been wounded, admitted incredulously: "But we expected you at six in the morning!" Covac was also liberated in this way.

The battlefield in this area was boiling like a big pot of water for a full fifteen days. As soon as one bubble came to the surface, disappearing in the hot steam, another would rise to take its place. This unnerved General Uzelac and also slowed him down, but he was unable to exhaust the strength of the Croatian units.

On September 15th, in the late afternoon, an attack began from the direction of Stara Gradiska. Cannon fire hit Croatian positions near the lines of Nova Gradiska-Bogicevci-Pivare-Prasnik-Nova Varos-Gredani-Covac. This depleted the fighters because it held them in a constant state of tension and they were unable to sleep. There were many wounded and dead, and the worst was they had no ammunition with which to return fire. Except for the grenade launchers and a few anti-tank systems for close range battle, the Croatian fighters were unarmed.

Ante sensed that something was underway and that the worst was yet to come. Before dawn the attacks intensified. The day broke dreary and foggy, and with it came Serb tanks and infantry. The Croatian troops defended themselves desperately, trying to stop the armor that was targeting them. Losses were horrendous, and the wounded were carried out by hand, as there were no ambulances; blood was everywhere, moaning, curses, and the horrific reverberations of the tank motors.

And then while this Serbian Goliath was pressing his heavy boot on the chest of the Croatian David, Colonal Celeketic came up from behind and struck from the direction of

Okucani. The 1st Brigade, together with local forces, found itself partially surrounded, exhausted, vulnerable, and in mortal danger. The battle was lost.

The only exit for the brigade was the *Prasnik* forest, and from there on to Nova Gradiska. General Uzelac noted this maneuver and sent there the Nislije, Serbian special forces. And then hand to hand combat began, man on man. Ante and the boys from Sljeme against the elite Nis parachuters. And then the Croatian units pulled out, taking their wounded and dead with them. The battle was bloody, with deaths on both sides. The Nis special forces became more cautious, having been surprised by the clean-shaven boys from the 1st Brigade. The Croatians had bought some time, and rescue was just around the corner. In the late evening hours, the last Croatian fighters left *Prasnik*. The dead they left behind, as they could not carry them out. A quiet night fell upon the wounded Slavonian ground.

General Uzelac was satisfied, as he was able to join his forces with those of Colonel Celeketic and cut off the Zagreb-Lipovac highway in the direction of Stara Gradiska-Okucani. But he had needed much more time than he had planned to complete the operation. A full 17 days to take only 10 kilometers of territory! That ate at him and prevented him from feeling like a true victor. He began to suspect that something was fishy if the almost totally unarmed Croatians could hold him off for so long.

Two days later, Ante, his men from the 1st Brigade, and the diversionaries returned again to *Prasnik*. The forest was under complete control of the enemy, but there were Croatian

soldiers lying dead there. They had come for these young boys, just as they had come for the wounded in Nova Gradiska. It was a moral imperative, understandable and natural; no danger could have thwarted them in this course. This also enabled them to feel that they had not been destroyed, but only hit hard. Because no force can ever claim victory over those who risk their lives for the dead.

A young boy lay next to a Slavonian oak tree which had scattered its acorns all over, his head buried in the leaves and debris, a boy who had fought heroically two nights ago against the Serbian special forces. But he did not die by their hand. He had been hit by shards of a projectile right between the neck and left shoulder blade. He lay there with this severe and deep wound, looking as though he had grown into the earth. He had been one of the best on Sljeme; from Slavonia but a Hercegovinian living in Zagreb, somewhere across the Sava River. He was crazy about motorcycles and driving fast and loved life; you could see by his wide smile and big, black eyes. His age? He had just turned twenty. Ante recognized him immediately. He seemed somehow even younger than he really was, almost a child. The thought crossed his mind: “He hadn’t even had a chance to live yet.”

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At the end of summer, when the war was intensifying and the European diplomats in Brussels and London were concocting plans for a peaceful “resolution of the crisis”, the superiority of the Yugoslav National Army and the local Chetniks over the Croatian

forces was still enormous. The Nova Gradiska battlefield showed this clearly. Cannon and rocket attacks, air support, tanks and iron-plated vehicles destroyed and decimated everything in their path. The Croatian defenders offered resistance, defending themselves desperately and *inconceivably* bravely.

As a professional soldier, this fascinated and surprised Ante. It bound him to his comrades in a way he had never before experienced. Though it was clear to him that they were in a terrible and inferior position, their bravery, enthusiasm, and irrepressible will to offer resistance when it was hopeless from a military standpoint, created within him a strange perspective, optimism, and *elan* which completely overwhelmed him.

He thought that as a professional soldier for over twenty years he had become accustomed to everything that war brings and takes away, but now he was overcome with a “positive lunacy”, the radiation of energy which had transformed the country and its people into one will, one desire. Without this romanticism, this madness, nobody would have dared resist the horrific power of the Yugoslav National Army. Sometimes it seemed to him that a higher power was involved; how else to explain the conviction that this force could be conquered when one’s mind said that the chances, especially in these first days, were next to zero? How to explain this irrepressible romanticism after so many lost battles? After the occupation of a third of the country? This conviction that you were victorious just because you managed to hold the chetniks and the JNA back only a few days longer than planned? How to explain the fact that when people were dying in droves, new volunteers were continually streaming in, astounding even the most

recalcitrant of enemies with their energy and enthusiasm? And their belief came to pass as time went on.

This strength of conviction made the enemies very uneasy, and in time they became impressed by it and even scared. Ante sensed this and it gave him a strength he had never felt anywhere before. On any battlefield in the world. So he didn't think about the absurd discrepancy in power between the two sides, or about the world which had imposed an arms embargo on Croatia, or the diplomats who had hoped that everything would end soon and that peace would be achieved, if only the peace of Croatian graveyards. No, he was "crazy in a positive way", just like his fellow fighters.

The blue *puch* caught in a trap

After the JNA and local Serbs cut off the highway by Nova Gradiska, the attacks on Novska became stronger every day. Parts of the 1st Brigade of the ZNG, together with local forces, defended this city which was only 100 kilometers from Zagreb the best way they knew how. The Croatian army was just being formed and in these days it more closely resembled an intermediately-trained hunting society in comparison to the JNA. Belgrade's goal was to take Novska at any price, thus opening the way to Kutina. Zagreb would then be within striking distance with long range artillery. When it came to the point of "to be or not to be" on the battlefield, President Tudjman went to Novska. In military uniform, with his generals and members of the government to raise the morale of

the fighters and to let the nation know unambiguously that it was here that the heart of Croatia was being defended.

But the situation was bad, because the Croatian forces were under constant enemy cannon fire, and exhausted by the increasing penetration of tanks and infantry. The losses were great and coordination weak. The situation on the battlefield depended for the most part on the ability, or lack thereof, of the commanders of the smaller formations. The only bright spot in this bloody and dramatic Croatian September and October was that the Serbian infantry, though supported by powerful tanks, cannons, and rockets, was not sufficiently effective. As though they had been paralyzed with the enthusiasm and heroism of the Croatian “hunting societies!” The fourth strongest military force in Europe had its own Achilles heel.

At the end of October, Ante and part of the 1st Brigade left for Novska. His assignment was to assume command in the zone between the city itself up to the villages of Brodic and Jasenovac. Parts of the 1st Brigade which were already there together with reserve units and local police were so exhausted that they had become deficient in discipline and organization. Like a man who has been driving all night and becomes disoriented just before dawn, losing his sense of space and distance.

When he arrived at the command post in Novska, he was given a map showing the Croatian defense lines, formations, and troop numbers. It was a classic turning over of power, which was usually done in the morning so that on the same day, the new

commander could inspect the terrain and observe what he had seen on the map. And acquaint himself as well with the configuration of the land and all other details important for the deployment of forces and organization of the battlefield.

Autumn had already arrived in Slavonia, the days were short and gray, and rain fell often, making the ground soggy and difficult to walk upon. The new commander wanted to go over the battlefield on a “quiet” day, so he lost no time. As soon as he left the command post, he took with him Gavran, the diversionaries Ruzic and Matuzan, and a local guide. Gavran (Damir Tomljanovic) was at that time commander in Brocic and it was his first action with Ante. He was holding an important overpass near the village, so he was also interested in seeing the formation and strength of the forces on the battlefield. They got into a jeep which was itself a legend. It was a blue police *puch*, the same one that had been damaged in Osijek when the JNA emerged from its barracks and swarmed over the village in tanks. First one of the tanks flattened a *fico*, which was captured by TV cameras, and then the blue police *puch* was hit in the chassis by a cannon, throwing it into a ditch like a pair of old underwear. But the motor was undamaged, so when the *puch* arrived in Zagreb, Ante had the upper part of the chassis removed, because it could not be repaired. Only the glass in front remained, framed by an iron plate which was held on from the back end by a carrier. An artillery gun was mounted on the plate, so that the jeep looked like the desert 4x4. Under the circumstances, it was a respectable-looking vehicle.

He left on inspection around 8:30 in the morning with his boys, and at 1:20 in the afternoon he was almost at the end: the iron bridge over the Strug canal, which he had already seen on the Nova Gradiska battlefield. Somewhere between Brocic and Jasenovac.

There was a company of Zagreb boys here which had withstood some heavy blows but had remained on its feet. “Boys, there’s another one of our units there behind the bridge, right?” Ante asked, in a tone confirming rather than asking. After all, he had seen it on the map and was told this at the time he assumed command. ‘That’s what we heard, too, but we haven’t seen anyone for a long time”, one of the boys answered, making a face as though he wanted to say: “That’s the way it is, what can you do?”

Ante, who was driving, kept on going slowly, saying “OK”. But something felt strange to him. Like something had just grabbed him, somewhere in his subconscious, and was digging into his brain. He was driving about 50 kilometers an hour and was tenser than usual. Jasenovac lay before him, and on the side of the road, heavy briars and dark bushes typical of muddy and gray Slavonia in late October. All of a sudden, about a hundred meters farther, he thought he saw a blue shadow moving or even nestling in the bushes. Was it just an hallucination? One that could appear to completely healthy people when they are under pressure?

But the drill in his brain that had been plaguing him was under no misconception: it sent a message to his foot in the speed of light and he braked on the spot. He immediately

heard a murmuring and uproar among the Serbs. The ambush had failed. At the same time, a fireball shot toward the *puch* and landed a meter in front of the hood.

It was a “tromblone” mine, ignited from a hand launcher. It doesn’t kill with shrapnel but scorches and burns like hell. “Get out now!” he yelled, jumping from the jeep. Everyone else bounced out behind him like tennis balls. Right into the ditch. The Serbs shot from all barrels, bullets whipped through the air, and the other mines flew through the left door window opening of the spooky, abandoned *puch*. At the same time, about 30 Serbs launched an attack, trying to surround the five Croatian fighters.

A cat and mouse battle ensues. Ante gives the command to retreat towards Brocic, through the bushes, which would be the only way out, if there were one. All five stay together so they can better defend themselves. The first Serbs get fairly close, to about 20-30 meters away. An order is given to throw hand grenades. Serbs respond also with hand grenades, and then from a distance of 10-15 meters it comes to hand on hand combat. The first attack is repulsed.

The Serbs suffer losses and need time to prepare a new attack. Meanwhile, the Croatians crawl through the bushes, which tear and pierce them like barbwire. And then they get up and fight. The Serbs are dangerously close. They yell out: “Here they are! We’ve got them! Surround the Ustashi motherfuckers! Hold on to them! Shoot, shoot now!”

Ante senses they won't hold out much longer, because the Serbs are attacking in waves. The only stroke of luck is that the terrain is difficult and the heavy bushes prevent them from making a frontal attack; they are forced to penetrate as well as they can, but only in groups. It is about 300 meters to the Strug canal and Ante gives the order to retreat in that direction. If they reach the canal, they are saved, because Croatian units are on the other side.

Just then the Serbs attempt a lateral penetration from the left side. The Croatians respond with a short artillery attack and throw a second series of hand grenades two by two. Moans and curses can be heard, and the Serbs are repelled once more. Then more crawling, as though on shards of glass, and jumping and fighting and crawling again... This lasts a good hour and a half. Then the Serbs stop, as though confused by something.

The pause doesn't last too long, but long enough for Ante, Gavran, Ruzic, Matuzan, and the guide to take a breath and persuade themselves there is still hope. They get themselves to the canal. Just when they begin to make their way across the dam, snipers start firing from about 2-300 meters away from the Croatian side of the battlefield.

Word had spread that commander Gotovina and his boys had fallen into an ambush, that they had been liquidated or taken prisoner, so the Croatian snipers were convinced that it was chetniks coming across the dam. Ante and his boys were fleeing not only the Serbs

but their own troops, and were unable to tell them what was happening because they had lost their communications equipment in the battle.

They throw everything into the water, keeping only two rounds of ammunition and their automatic weapons. They swim and then wade through the heavy muck, then swim again in the direction of Brocice. The water is cold and snipers on both sides of the dam are just waiting for them to come out. About 8pm they emerge from the water like field mice.

Brocice is weirdly empty, but not dangerous. The enemy is on the other side of the iron bridge, counting its wounded and dead, and cursing the idiot that had arbitrarily stopped the blue *puch* 100 meters too early. Then they fire off two tank grenades, whose detonation bursts Gavran's eardrum. Besides being scraped and scratched like pigs running through a thicket, that was the only serious injury incurred during the battle with the chetniks. The only thing stranger was the shock registered when Gotovina burst into the command post in Novska.

Marijan Marekovic was already there, having come from Lipovljani where he had been commander of the operative group of the 1st Brigade. "Here he is, he's here!" called out the astounded Marekovic, his burden instantly lighter. "None of our boys is over by Jasenovac, the way you've got it on the map," Ante angrily commented, instead of giving an answer. He knew they didn't have this information in the command post, because the

reserve units who were supposed to hold this part of the battlefield had left their positions on their own initiative. “That’s the way it is, unfortunately,” he added.

The same night, about 3am, several Croatian boys passed over the bridge unnoticed. The blue *puch* was still standing on the road, a little worse for wear from the shooting, but still alive. Under cover of the fog that had slowly descended, it was returned to the Croatian side.

Tank operators in handcuffs

If Zagreb was defended in Novska, then Novska was defended in Stari Grabovac, which was a typical Slavonian village; in Dalmatia it would be considered fairly large, but here this was not the case. The 2-3000 inhabitants who had lived prior to the war in houses on both sides of the road, all the way to where the Novska city limits began, didn’t care about that, though.

The village lay on a tank penetration route for Novska and Kutina, which meant in military terminology that it lay on the road on which tanks, armor and everything else would have to pass. Especially in the fall, when the ground was moist like dough, and everything that went into it stayed there. Whether it was vehicle tracks, strength, or energy. Thus the JNA was constantly firing on and bombing Stari Grabovac, assaulting the first line of defense and trying in any way possible to gain control of this area.

It launched four large, decisive assaults, in which infantry coming from the direction of Donji and Gornji Rajic-Kricko Brdo and one tank unit participated. With ten T-55 and T-34 tanks. After the Serb cannons had assailed the Croatian forces all night long, two to three Serb infantry units would generally launch an attack, early in the morning, when the fog was not too thick but still sufficient to offer some kind of protection. They would spread out left and right from the tanks which with a horrific and frightening din would take over the road. The infantry would protect the flank of the tanks, and the tanks would open the way for the infantry, destroying and annihilating everything in its path.

Ante set his defense so that the first lines were protected by anti-infantry and anti-tank mines, and along the road, opposite the tanks, he deployed his bravest and best commanders. Deeper into the village the reserve forces had been placed, capable and quick fighters whose task was to jump in quickly if Croatian forces began to attack the enemy with a left or right encirclement. But the essence of the defense was to hit the first and last tank, immediately at the beginning and as fast as possible.

To succeed here, the most capable unit, division, and corps commanders were needed. If the strategy worked, the other tanks would get stuck and be unable to move quickly either forward or backward. And if the troops had bad nerves, they would panic. The tank operators would begin to flee like rabbits hearing the baying of hunting dogs, leaving behind them the decapitated armor.

This scenario, which the Croatian fighters were able to successfully implement every time, would provoke panic among the infantry as well. The losses were sometimes very large on both sides, but Stari Grabovac never fell. In spite of the continuing superiority of the JNA and local chetnik forces in technology, armor, and artillery. The Croatian units were better armed with *wasps* and *hornets*; anti-tank systems, logistics, and organization were also better than on the Nova Gradiska battlefield which, along with better-trained troops, played a significant role. In war you oriented yourself quickly, and learned to identify the enemy's weaknesses, especially if they were of a psychological nature.

During one such decisive attack, the Croatian defenders succeeded in hitting two assault tanks. The last one was not destroyed, but nonetheless, panic broke out among the enemy forces, loss of morale ensued, and the Croatians ultimately won the battle. When they peeked into the interior of the Russian-produced tank afterwards, the Grabovac defenders couldn't believe their eyes: the driver and the "shooter" in the tank were handcuffed to the cannon and steering mechanism! That's how much faith their officers had had in their bravery and motivation.

The war was entering its most bloody month; All Saints' Day had passed, and with it the possibility of preserving Yugoslavia and the army, whose officers sent their own people into battle in handcuffs.

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Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That's how it was with the army. Parts of the 1st Brigade which with other units held the Novska-Brodice battlefield began increasingly to attack instead of defend. The oncoming winter slowed down the JNA and everyone breathed easier behind the lines. The Serb snipers, who were hitting Ante's fighters from the skyscraper in Novska while the JNA was attacking Stari Grabovac with full force, were frustrated. It would have been easier to move towards Kricko Brdo, a thickly forested district, perhaps 600-700 meters high.

Military chiefs say that whoever dominates the heights dominates the low country as well. Ante knew this and therefore did everything he could to drive the chetniks from this difficult and cold terrain where the snow was very deep in winter. The terrain was only accessible by foot, tanks didn't have a chance, and this was a major advantage. Here you had a chance to show what you were made of, your strength and motivation, and character in battle.

The Croatian forces quickly took control of these heights and attained an important tactical advantage. The enemy never knew from which side they would attack, from which direction the assault would come. And this was a big psychological advantage, because the enemy was forced to wait while you chose the time and place, protected by the heavy forest, trenches, and heights. The activities of the Croatian forces increased day by day; attacks on enemy logistics and reinforcements were more and more

successful. And Ante felt that the necessary preconditions had been created for the first, serious offensive actions.

The forces of the 1st Brigade attacked up until the beginning of December in the direction of Donji and Gornji Rajici towards Okucani and Pakrac, liberating the villages of Bair, Popovac, Donje and Gornje Kricke, Livadane, Brezovec, and Korita. With this, a unified defense line, Novska-Pakrac, was created. The focus of the Croatian offensive then moved toward the village of Bijeje Stijene, near Okucani.

But the price in human suffering was high. Just before the attack on Donje and Gornje Kricke, Ante sent three of his boys out to scout the terrain so that they would have information necessary to mount the planned operation. One of the three was a 17-year-old boy from Bosanska Posavina who had completed the surveillance-diversionary training on Sljeme. He was small and gave the impression of being rather weak, but was in reality tough and resistant. Like a full grown man. He was betrayed only by his almost child-like face, from which sprouted the humble first beginnings of a beard.

After they failed to return after a long time, Ante ordered a combing of the terrain. They found them about two kilometers from the Kricko Brdo base. The youth lay crucified on a tree trunk, bound, and mutilated as though wild, hungry animals had fallen on him. His nose and tongue had been cut off, his genitals ripped out, stomach slashed open, and testicles mutilated. His entire body was full of wounds, as though spears had rained

down on him. It was obvious that he, in contrast to the others, had been caught alive and that they had tortured him horrendously.

“Take him away” Ante ordered curtly and then felt his own heart twist within him, an indeterminate pressure which quickly transformed itself into an irresistible urge to act, to show his soldiers that there was still justice in the world, that murderers and executioners of this kind would not remain unpunished.

He took some diversionaries with him and the same day penetrated the enemy territory, eight to ten kilometers from the Croatian lines. The move was risky and he therefore wanted to personally command the action. The goal was to destroy the bridge between Donji and Gornji Rajici and the line Rajcici-Bijela Stijene.

This bridge was very important to the Serbs because their logistics and reinforcements passed over the very points which were now the objectives of the upcoming Croatian offensive. Werner Ilic, a Croatian who had come from America, participated in this action. At that time, he weighed about 120 kilos and could barely survive long marches, since he was not only too heavy but also very tall and corpulent. His feet would always be covered with bloody blisters, but he would go on stoically; later he became one of the best fighters.

At the moment when Ante ordered the explosives to be activated, a smaller column of vehicles rolled up to the bridge. Several hours later, Serb sources announced that several

of their soldiers and one officer had been blown off the bridge. The old warrior exhaled at this news, deeply satisfied but still overwhelmed with grief.

Slippery boots

The Croatian offensive in Slavonia was becoming more and more successful, so the decision was taken in Zagreb to move the focus of the operation toward Biješe Stijene, a village above Okučani. Ante prepared the attack from a secured position on Kricko Brdo. In Lipovljani, where the operation command post was located, he was promised cannon support and one tank detachment. But on December 11, when the attack began under heavy fog in the early morning hours, only one T-55 tank was available. The others had broken down and were not usable. The cannons weren't even that much help; they were of more psychological assistance than anything else. At this point in time, the Croatian army had begun to build up its army, but was still in a *romantic phase*, inadequately connected and integrated on a logistical level, and using boys whose knowledge of the trade was rudimentary. It was like giving a man a cap in a snowstorm, but no gloves.

It was about 80 kilometers from Kricko Brdo to the village of Rajčici, which lay along the route leading to Biješe Stijene. Ante penetrated through the heavily forested terrain with his four infantry units, deploying his forces in the area like a goose which, when it attacks, spreads its wings and extends his neck.

Around ten in the morning, the first lines of the enemy were already broken through. The JNA and the chetniks retreated chaotically, and Ante's forces drove them toward Rajcici, not giving them a moment to catch their breath. They entered Rajcici during this big push and liberated it, like some kind of gargantuan toppling everything in its path. This was a strategically important village, because it opened the route toward Bijele Stijene and enabled domination over the villages scattered along the route Donji and Gornji Rajcici-Okucani.

The Croatian infantry illustrated its great potential in these confrontations, and there were many legendary commanders of the 1st Brigade who later distinguished themselves: Tomo Medvjed, who was wounded twice; Gavran, who died much later; and Ivica Perkovic. All were company commanders who with their strength, agility, tactics, and maneuvers on the ground devastated the Serbian units. Especially in places where the armor, aviation, and deadly cannons could not be effective.

The Serb forces chaotically abandoned the area around Rajcici and, just when they were facing definitive capitulation, reinforcements arrived. About 1pm, JNA helicopters performed a deployment, injecting reserve forces into the Croatian hinterland and on the right flank. With the intention of stopping further Croatian penetration toward Bijele Stijene. Young boys looking as though they were specially trained jumped from the helicopters. All their ordinance powerful and supple, many wearing fur caps which carried a large insignia of a white eagle. Some had beards, the traditional characteristic of the chetnik.

Ante reacted immediately. His forces were already spread out for the most part, and had taken the territory very quickly. They had just come out of Rajcici, driving the enemy. But only the left flank was relatively secure. And night was falling, so it was important to get into a protected position. So Ante gave the order to retreat to the plateau, a mountain on the edge of the village where they could take refuge and sleep safely through the night. When the Croatian forces began to return, Perkovic and his company attacked the enemy, which was endangering the Croatian right flank. In this bloody battle he took a bullet in the stomach and was bleeding heavily. If his comrades had not been able to get him out quickly and transfer him to Kricko Brdo and from there to Kutina and Zagreb, he would have died.

This Croatian life-saving maneuver was noticed right away by the enemy, so they deployed twenty White Eagles into a heavy forest in front of the plateau Ante wanted to reach. They were well armed and trained special forces whose assignment it was to hold the Croatian forces until reinforcements arrived. And this meant mortal danger. Because between the forest and the place where the Croatian fighters were gathering was a cleared terrain about 70-80 meters long.

As long as the White Eagles were in the forested area, a retreat by the Croatian forces along the only forest path to their right was neither safe nor possible. But they also couldn't stay any longer where they were because the Serbs had begun cannon and grenade attacks. The situation was like a chess game in which one player takes a piece

easily, but then the other makes a move that calls everything into question. At that moment, Ante's warrior instincts awoke, the feeling that tells you there is no greater danger than vacillation or waiting, that a voluntary descent into hell is less horrible than a hell you are thrown into by somebody else.

It is somewhere around 2pm. Fog is creeping in and with it, dusk. This has to be avoided at all costs, because in foggy, nighttime conditions, the units could easily get stuck. So he makes a decision. He selects twenty of the best fighters from the surveillance-diversionary units, and places ten on the left and the other ten on the right. He quickly explains to them what they are to do, and then gives the command to charge.

Across the cleared terrain directly on the White Eagles in the forest. They run bent over and open fire with automatic weapons especially suited for close range battle. The White Eagles return with sniper and short artillery fire. Bullets fly from all directions, and the cracking drowns out everything. Some Croatian fighters are already hit and lie with their soul in their mouths on the cursed plains, but the others run on, jumping and springing like wild cats, shooting. They are already about 25 meters from the White Eagles.

Ante is almost stopped in his tracks by a medical vehicle. It is destroyed and from its open left door a wounded Croatian fighter is hanging, stuck. Shot many times, and unable to move and get down on the ground for protection. "Help me take cover" the youth yells as Ante comes running. Without stopping, Ante moves his F.A.L., a deadly automatic weapon, into his left hand, continues shooting in the direction of the White

Eagles, and with his right hand grabs the boy and throws him to the ground. He turns slightly to the right as he swings him off the door, and just at that moment, a bullet hits his exposed flank, just behind the bone in his buttocks.

The bullet passed through the flesh on the left and came out on the right, a millimeter from his large intestine. Blood was flowing from the four wounds caused by just one bullet. He was thrown to the ground by the blow. As though he had been hit by a club. His legs began to tingle, and then his back. The wound itself did not hurt; even if it had, he had no time for pain. He quickly drew the F.A.L. and pointed it toward the enemy, who was shooting at him and the boy from the medical vehicle; he then got hit in the chest. After a few minutes, the skirmish ended. All the White Eagles from the forest had been liquidated, 27 of them, and ten of the Croatian fighters had fallen.

Soon thereafter, the repaired tank arrived on the cleared terrain. The wounded commander had gotten up and, holding on to it, had set off in the direction of the plateau. The battle lasted awhile longer until the Croatian forces had assumed control of the area and occupied the secure lines where they had planned to take refuge, joining up with the rest of the forces on Kricko Brdo.

Around 4pm, Ante called all his commanders together and gave his final orders and directions. Only then did he realize how weak he was, but more internally, as though he were falling apart. Like the ceiling of a collapsed house that has been shaken by an earthquake. "Give me a cigarette" he said in a tone that exposed this weakness and

distress. But he didn't address anyone in particular, as though wanting to save his strength. He just held out his trembling hand, put the cigarette in his mouth, and waited for someone to light it for him. Then he inhaled slowly and deeply. All of a sudden everything went black. In a split second, before he sank into utter oblivion, he felt that his boots were slippery and this amazed him somehow.

When they had undressed him and placed him into a medical vehicle, there was enough blood in his boots for a good transfusion. He was transferred from Kutina to the Rebro hospital in Zagreb. There he remained for three days, and then, at his own request, he went to Vrapce for further treatment. He lay on his stomach in bed for seventeen days with drains in his wounds.

The intensity of Croatian force activities decreased on the Novska-Pakrac battlefield after his wounding, and in 1992, the UN forces moved into these territories. Ante celebrated the diplomatic recognition of Croatia on crutches. Croatia was euphoric because its dream of dreams had been realized: the country had defended itself in an unequal and bloody war and had also been recognized internationally as a state! Ante could finally relax and recuperate. Shot in the butt, but otherwise fine.

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One morning he pulled himself along the Vrapce hallway with the assistance of his crutches, heading for the telephone to call Commander Lucic. When he passed a bench

on which four big men were sitting, someone said “Hi, Ante!” He looked at them briefly and said “Hi, guys”. He thought they were boys who had fought with him in Slavonia and that they were waiting for someone.

He limped to the phone, and when he returned, the boys repeated: “Hi, Ante.” He was about to say again “Hi, boys” when he took a closer look. One of the faces looked familiar. Everything was the same except it was a bit larger, planted on a powerful neck and body, like that of a buffalo. He took another look, and then, as though someone else were speaking, asked: “Is that you, Boro?” The other smiled and, getting up, responded: “Who else would it be?” And then he embraced Ante and Ante did the same, together with his crutches.

It was a reunion of the brothers, after a full twenty years. The only thing that had passed between them in all this time had been a single postcard sent from the Foreign Legion and what they carried in their hearts. Boro had also been a soldier and heard somehow that his brother was not only in Croatia but had been wounded on the Slavonian battlefield. He had come to Zagreb with three of Ante’s old friends to see his older brother, the one they continually spoke about at home, always harboring a concealed hope that he would some day return. When he tired of adventure. They stayed together for two hours, looking at each other like children with adoring gazes, and telling each other things people from the same family usually know all too well.

Oh, you’ve come home!

If the snow is a little deeper in Maximir Park in January, then it's almost certain that February will be cold and sunny. The mountains of Sljeme at this time of year seem to have been painted by de Ciriaco: somehow motionless in the distance, lonely, and brilliant as crystal. As though the cold sun had set on the Sava River and turned the murky water into a golden green veil, illuminating the city from its depths like some kind of immense theatre stage without actors. But as soon as you go down the hill, heading into traffic from the Sestinski Lagvic restaurant, you have the feeling that the city has suddenly disappeared and that only the passersby, the tram on Mihaljevac, and the avenues of linden trees going towards the Zvijezda intersection remain. February then looks like an ordinary gray winter without snow.

But it was different during these days. People were illuminated by hope and consumed with the self confidence of someone who had done a great thing. The country had been defended, and even though a third of the territory remained under occupation, nobody doubted that the war had been won. After all, what the large European newspapers had been predicting for months had not happened: Croatia had not been crushed in just a few weeks, and Serbian tanks were not in the center of Zagreb. Even though General Bobetko, who resembled Napoleon in build and had a thunderous nature, was crying *betrayal* about Kostajnica and about the 102nd Brigade which, he said, got stuck unnecessarily in Kupa. And the people of Vukovar were desperate because their city had fallen when they had been sure they were going to be able to hold it. Passions bubbled over, emotions were inflamed, and conflicting interests came to the surface. But this was

all lost in the refrain of *Danke Deutschland*. The *Vance Plan* and the diplomatic recognition of the states gave everyone breathing space and resurrected new hope. Like a boxer who can hardly stand on his feet but then comes to and, with new *elan* and determination, reenters the fray.

Ante had completely recuperated from his wounds, and at the beginning of February he became the Deputy Commander of the Special Forces of the Main headquarters. Over him was his old friend from the Foreign Legion, General Ante Roso, who was somewhat older than he and with whom he had fought together throughout Africa. Roso had the reputation in the Legion of being an expert on the anti-tank systems, and his comrades liked him because of his strong character, impeccable military bearing, and his lively and relaxed nature.

These two had the task of organizing and harmonizing various special units within the Main headquarters which had during the war come into existence in various ways and circumstances. It was a colorful group which needed to be unified, brought under a uniform discipline, and trained for special assignments. The worst was over, but the war was far from finished. It had only been postponed and moved. Dubrovnik remained in the grip of Montenegro and chetniks from Trebinja, and Hercegovina was endangered by the Knin corps, which were commanded by the notorious General Mladic, and under attack from within by the JNA there and Bosnian Serbs. Ploce found itself in mortal danger and an attack on Split could also not be ruled out. The pot was boiling. There wasn't yet enough steam to lift the lid but it had already begun to percolate.

Ante stayed in the Main Headquarters in April, and when the situation in Livno heated up, he went to this small Hercegovinian town. General Bobetko personally appointed him commander of the HVO forces, district headquarters, with the task of defending the wider Livno territory from the gray Dinaric mountains to the village of Malovani. Bobetko was preparing for the liberation of Dubrovnik and Prevlake, so it was critical to prevent attempts by the enemy to penetrate the battlefields toward Vaganj-Sinj in one direction and, in the other, Busko Lake near Trilj, and then toward Split.

On the other hand, the old general was convinced that there was another danger: if the Knin corps took Livno, they could easily break out into the wider area of the Neretva and cut off the Croatian forces. Then southern Croatia would be lost and the country truncated on its soft underbelly.

On the way to Livno, Ante decided to stop over in Pakostan. He had not been there since he had returned to Croatia. He hadn't contacted his father, his grandfather and grandmother in Tkon, or his brothers and sister, Anica. He had only seen his brother Boris in Zagreb and a little later, an old friend from his childhood, Zelkjo Kurtov, nicknamed Bus, who had also found him in Vrapce. He hadn't seen him for over 20 years and hadn't contacted him, though they had been inseparable at one time.

Bus had a very thorny and arrogant nature; he loved to get in fights and knew how to fight. As a youth he had been a real rabble-rouser and so hot-headed that the smallest

thing could light his fuse. He would calm down only when he had beaten the daylights out of someone or had the same thing done to him. But on the other hand, he had remained a perpetual child. In the depths of his soul good and a bit naïve. But by no means stupid. Thus he had achieved the position of battle commander in the Zadar hinterlands and shown himself to be a good soldier. Ante was not surprised by this, because he had always seen in this *wild creature* the other side of his nature, a side that awakened in him a love for flowers. He later took up this profession and made his living from it.

Bus brought Pakostan to Zagreb for him in a special way. Childhood events were resurrected in the most colorful way; he also learned of the tragic fate of Srecko.

After Ante had sailed off into the world on the Jela Topic, that old courage and desire for adventure had returned to Srecko, so he joined the navy. He sailed on some old cargo vessel which they said had later sunk under strange circumstances. This news hit him hard, but not so much because of grief for an old friend, but because of Fate, inexplicable and unavoidable.

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When you go into Pakostan from the Magistrala highway, you have to turn right onto an asphalt road which is graced on both sides with typical Mediterranean avenues. Soon thereafter you see on the left the local club's soccer field, and then you turn left, and right

after a short distance, and then you are in the center of town, on the *Riva*. Here is grandfather Sime's house, and farther down on the left his father's house, which he had built when he returned from Zagreb. The house today looks like a Mediterranean villa, not of the A category, obviously renovated, but with a pretty garden and a centuries old statue of a Negress which with its head provides the entry way with shade. The entrance is almost hidden from the left side so that the front, with the half circle balcony, makes a better presentation.

Ante entered Pakostan feeling like a boy who had separated from his girlfriend years ago and is now returning to a mature woman. Everything was the same as it was the day he left twenty years ago on the bus from Zadar, and everything was at the same time different. His friends were now grown men, and a new *Riva* and harbor had been built, but the smell of the firs and view of the sea were the same. His father was also the same; he still spoke very little, and still hid his emotions.

“Oh, you've come home! Look at him!” his father said when he entered the house. He immediately realized that his father was really saying that everyone always comes home, that's the unwritten law. It didn't matter if you were gone a quarter of a century. When you come back, you have come home. And that's also the reason you have returned. It was a meeting of two men, just like their parting long ago. Without a lot of words and sentiment, but with similar vibrations of the soul.

He also went to see his grandfather and grandmother on Pasma, and visited his brothers; but it was especially important to him to go to his mother's grave. To pray for the one who had given her life for his, who had probably watched over him all this time, and lived forever within him, though he barely remembered her.

He probably loved his sister so much because of her. She was already a grown woman and had three children. Two sons and one daughter, just like his parents. She named the oldest son Ante, after her brother who had now returned and who, when he came to her in Zadar where she lived, she could barely see through her tears. She just embraced him, weeping like a scared child who knows there is no reason to be afraid but still can't calm itself. And to him, this grown woman seemed not to have changed at all since he had seen her at the bus station, watching as she awkwardly waved at him. She had the same facial features, the same gentleness, and her mother's eyes, which had watched over him on the sea, in the jungle, and in the desert.

General, we've got more than 9,000 incorrigible Ustashi here!

The situation on the Livno battlefield was critical. The Croatian forces in Kupres experienced a serious and perhaps unnecessary defeat. Many Vukovar fighters who had gone there as volunteers after the decimation of their city lost their lives. It was also critical in Mostar. The enemy was also attempting to take control of the Neretva basin and attack in the direction of Citluk, and then Metkovic and Ploce. This forced General Bobetko to deploy a battle unit of the 4th Brigade of the ZNG into the area, as he had

been informed that Colonel Perak, whose command was in Citluk, was collaborating with the Yugoslav secret police. The old general carefully implemented “*Operation Transfer*”, but Perak sensed that something was wrong and simply disappeared. It was later said that he was living somewhere in Belgrade.

These were difficult days for western Hercegovina. Seven armored and motorized brigades under the command of the notorious Colonel Lisica, after having committed a massacre in Kupres, hit the Croatian forces holding the Livno battlefield with full intensity. Behind them was the powerful hand of General Mladic who, as commander of the Knin corps, was the brains of the operation in this area. The Serbs were technically superior and drunk with their successes, and the Croats a bit demoralized and disorganized. Especially after the tragedy in Kupres. Every severe defeat in war acts on the psyche and morale like a hammer blow. Especially if the enemy is on the move, as was the case with the JNA and chetniks. On the other hand, the loss of Livno would have caused irreparable harm, as Split would then have been under direct cannon and rocket fire, and the Knin corps forces would easily have joined up with those in the Neretva basin. The pressure in the direction of Ploce would have become untenable and deadly for the south of Croatia. The Livno battlefield therefore had to be held at all costs.

The fact that Ante had taken command of a zone 75 kilometers long – from the peaks of the Dinar’s Veliki and Mali Sokolac, to the villages of Livanjsko Polje, Donji Rujani and Celebic – and further in the direction of Koricina, the mountains of Cincar and the village of Donji Malovani - presented a particular difficulty. On this difficult and very diverse

terrain, which was characterized by changeable and severe climatic conditions, he had at his disposal only some local forces, two volunteer units, and a unit from the 4th Brigade.

All in all about 4,700 people, without armor and only scant artillery. Also poorly integrated and unified. Actually, General Roso had begun preparations for better organizing the defense, but at the time of Ante's arrival, he had not yet succeeded in establishing such organization.

As soon as Ante arrived, he inspected the terrain, got to know the configurations, people, logistics, and weapons, and then divided the defense zone into six sectors according to the characteristics of the topography. Since the terrain and climate were severe and demanding, the units had to rest often, which endangered the stability of the defense. Because when fresh troops arrive with new commanders, it can often be too late by the time they get to know the terrain and all its traps. Especially on such a long battlefield, where the enemy is constantly injecting diversionaries or armored infantry forces. Of course in Livno there were command posts all along the defense lines; that is, for all six sectors. Here it was Ante and Davor Domazet Loso.

“Here, this is my defense”, he said after fifteen days in Livno, and handed Domazet a map with the sectors and command points drawn in. “What do you think about this?” Domazet took the map, studied it, and then answered energetically “This is a modular sector system!” “Thanks” Ante answered, and added, smiling, “Now I know what I’ve done.” But Domazet was convinced that it was really a system of defense that both

enabled flexibility and maintained stability on the long and difficult battlefield.

“Phenomenal, this is really a stable defense”, he said, a bit surprised by Ante’s smile.

And then, as though he had just remembered something important, asked: “And what would you call it?” “A modular sector system, what else”, he answered without batting an eye.

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The enemy hit from two directions: from D. Rujani-Celebic-Livno, and from Koricina-Livno. In the four months during which Ante had been there, Colonel Lisica’s units carried out three intense attacks with armored-infantry forces. Along with this, they were deploying their diversionaries in all defense sectors, hitting Livno and neighboring areas, and Croatian defense lines with rocket systems.

After setting up a firm defense, Ante then had to take the initiative on the battlefield. Because if you just defend yourself and suffer losses, that has an adverse effect on people, and gives the enemy incentive to attack with greater ferocity. Besides, it decreases the possibility for maneuvering space, and for assuming more advantageous defense lines. He therefore decided to organize an intervention unit under his direct command, with the best fighters from all companies, including those from Muslim units who were otherwise defending the areas around the Cincar mountains. These were well-trained boys who had deployed in the enemy hinterlands and were launching broad attacks in order to ease the critical situation in the sector.

The best fighters from the intervention unit were in the surveillance-diversionary companies; they infiltrated enemy ranks night and day, inflicting constant and surprising losses throughout the entire battlefield. This animated everyone so much that after a month and a half, the psychological situation had radically changed.

But in the first days, Colonel Lisica was continually sending his diversionaries into the Croatian flanks, where they sowed fear, cut throats, and killed people. At first Ante was unable to stop this scourge. Fear and anxiety had seeped into his men, the defense line had not been fully consolidated, and the initiative was in the hands of the enemy. Since he had only scant supplies at his disposal, he conjured up the idea of setting up traps in front of the defense lines. He put about 300 of them about five kilometers in front of the most endangered sectors. They were so well concealed by leaves, branches, and detritus that not even the most well-trained could have discovered them.

As dusk began to fall, the chetnik diversionaries set off for another of their death marches. But one of them got caught in a trap and screamed out so loud that the others ran away, not daring to take another step forward. As soon as this happened, an experienced Croatian warrior reported to his units to watch out, because thousands of these traps had been laid in front of all sector defense lines; but he relayed this information over a mobile phone he was certain was being monitored by the KOS (Yugoslav secret police), and in such a way that he sounded cryptic, but not enough to prevent his message from being decoded. “Some chetnik apparently got stuck in one of

these *monsters* and was yelling so loud that even our guys heard him” he said over the mobile phone. “Watch out that these *beasts* don’t get a hold of you, because there are thousands of them and there’s no way you can see them.” Afterwards, the Serb diversionaries stayed completely away from Croatian lines, and they never killed, bayoneted, or slit anyone’s throat again.

Domazet, whom General Bobetko didn’t particularly like and whom he had sent to Livno to “prove” and “redeem” himself, showed himself to be a good officer and very capable in intelligence assignments. He organized electronic espionage and intelligence which enabled monitoring of enemy intentions and the mounting of an effective defense, and provided the conditions necessary to take initiative on the battlefield. Thanks to these tactical advances, a better position and more active defense were guaranteed.

Ante paid particular attention to special warfare. He knew that it was sometimes more important to delude or trick the enemy than to show bravery and artistry, especially when one was militarily inferior. So during the night he sent empty buses in all directions, knowing that this *transfer of forces* would be noted by the enemy intelligence service. Whenever he could, he placed news in the media to confuse the enemy and enable him to launch surprise counterattacks in various parts of the battlefield.

“We have to convince that damn Lisica that we are stronger than we really are. That’s the only way they will hold back, the only way we can catch our breath” he told Domazet one day, adding: “From now on, we are going to cook food for 9,000 soldiers and in

three different places.” “Twice as much as we need,” Domazet added, and as though repeating Ante’s thoughts, asked: “And what are we going to do with the extra 4,000 portions?” “Look” said Ante in a tone that suggested he had been waiting for this question, “you’re going to take care of that. Take your most trusted guys and have them throw the leftovers in some hidden ditch at night.” And then, articulating clearly every word: “This is to be kept top secret!”

Weeks and weeks of ferocious battles followed. Colonel Lisica failed to break Croatian resistance. The Livno battlefield held, and General Bobetko, who had led successful liberation operations in Dubrovnik and Prevlake in the south, wrote the following in his war journal: “Maintaining our force strength on the Livno territory provided us with the short time necessary to perform very sensitive tasks.”

Though it was the middle of summer, Domazet blew into his hands as though trying to warm them. But his face betrayed him. He had something completely different on his mind, which he wanted to conceal at first so that the surprise would be even greater. After he had closed the door behind him and stopped for a moment, indecisive, he glided like a dancer over to the table and shoved under Ante’s nose a *phonogram* of a conversation his boys had intercepted somewhere.

General Mladic was yelling at Colonel Lisica: “You are an incompetent moron! You can’t do anything the way it should be done. I’m f...ing sick of your incompetence. You listen to me. You need to fix what you have f...ed up! Are you aware that you were

defeated by a handful of Ustashi?” Colonel Lisica, who had apparently listened quietly to all this, answered: “Mr. General, this wasn’t a handful of Ustashi, there were more than 9,000 incorrigible Ustashi! Give me some reinforcements, because this just isn’t going to work.” “What do you mean, 9,000?” Mladic asked, not believing his ears. “Yes, sir, 9,000, that’s how many portions they cook each day. I have confirmed information on this” Lisica repeated. “Good, we’ll see when I come up to where you are” Mladic concluded.

“Send this to General Bobetko”, Ante said after he had read the *phonogram*. “And make sure Mladic doesn’t find out Lisica’s telling him fairy tales”, he added, smiling. “At your command”, Domazet answered, trying not to burst into laughter.

Writing much later about these days, General Bobetko recorded the following in his book, All My Battles: “People I saw and met for the first time in my life proved themselves on this territory. The first, then a colonel and now a general, was Ante Gotovina. He performed his assignments in a rational and disciplined manner, he was always studying, as he was aware that his knowledge was insufficient for the position he held. He was always very cautious and took a step forward every day. We worked together from then until July 15, 1995, and he grew into a very capable commander who with further schooling could assume the highest positions within the Croatian army.”

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Maslenica

Early in the morning, a little before dawn, General Roso headed off to the UNPROFOR French battalion's command sector, which covered the area from Biograd to Zadar, and especially the villages of Crno and Murvice. Roso had been in the Foreign Legion, spoke French perfectly, and was born for the task with which he had been entrusted by the Head of the Chiefs of Staff of the Croatian Army, General Bobetko.

“Go there and tell them we are going into action in an hour. To pull back so they aren't in the line of fire” said the old general, adding that President Tudjman had given this order, having in mind the delicate political situation and relations with the international community. Bobetko said this in a tone which made it clear that it was to “remain between the two of them”. And then he shook his head, as though indicating he had assented to something he did not agree with; after all, since when did you inform anyone what time an attack would take place? This was very irregular and certainly outside the scope of a commander's duties. “Well, that's the situation we're in”, he said, shaking his head some more. “When you're liberating the country, you have to pay attention to things like this. What can you do?” Roso didn't answer or show what he thought, but in his heart, he agreed totally with the old general. “But an order is an order”, he thought, sitting in the jeep.

When he entered the command post of the French battalion, a smiling officer he knew from before was waiting for him. He motioned for him to sit down, but Roso said immediately that he had come to inform them of the Croatian operation just about to start

and to pull out their people to keep them from getting hurt. When he heard this, the Frenchman was astounded. When he had collected himself, he started to laugh, saying that Roso was a real jokester, and that he didn't believe him because "we know what shape your army is in. Don't take offense, but that's a fact, you don't have the forces or the opportunity for such an action."

But Roso was unperturbed and the expression on his face said that he was not joking. "Sir, I am officially informing you about this and request written confirmation that you have received my information so that tomorrow, there will be no ambiguity." The Frenchman continued to laugh, but he nonetheless provided the written confirmation, all the while looking as though he were amazed he'd allowed himself to participate in such an absurdity.

In one hour, the Maslenica operation began. Croatian forces attacked with full force the Serbian paramilitaries which had hunkered down in Ravni Kotari and in World War II fortresses built by the Italians. The Serbs were caught by surprise, not believing that they were in the middle of a battle they had not initiated themselves. International diplomats protested and threatened the Croatians for "obstructing peace and balance."

But it was too late. The air around Zadar was thick with smoke and gunpowder. Croatia was playing Russian roulette in which the result could be: victory and life or catastrophe and death. Serbs were superior in technology and manpower. The Croatians had an irrepressible *elan* and a well-trained 4th Guard Brigade and 1st Guard Unit, but the others

were poorly consolidated, uneven home defense units. All in all about 7,500 Croatian fighters against twice as many hunkered down Serbs.

Ante had been appointed Commander of the 6th operative zone of Split in October, 1992, which was later through reorganization transformed into a Unit Area. He was promoted to brigadier because of his successes on the Livno battlefield, and General Bobetko was named Head of the Chiefs of Staff of the Croatian Army around the same time. Tudjman had decided to launch the operation because the country was in an untenable situation: it was almost cut in half, so that to reach Zadar and the south of Croatia, one had to go through the island of Pag. Besides, the Serbs had Zadar, Sibenik, and other places under continual control, and it was only a matter of time before they launched a final major attack, totally amputating this part of the coast from the mother country.

“Gentlemen, prepare the action as soon as possible, because later conditions will not work to our advantage” the President told his generals at the beginning of 1993. Adding: “the goal is clear. The deblockading of Zadar and liberation of the wider area of Maslenica.”

Ante immediately began preparations, and one of the key steps was moving the command from Split to Zadar. It was also critical that everything be kept top secret so that UNPROFOR, which had units in all key locations, didn't notice any movement of Croatian forces, weaponry, and so forth. Complete surprise was the most important advantage to be had by the Croatian side. Only that could provoke a momentary

psychological paralysis among the “maintainers of peace” and the rebel Serbs. Like a wind which blows through an open window, taking everything along in its wake.

This was the first inter-border operation; that is, an operation in which the navy and air forces joined with ground forces. But its political significance was even more important. Not only because of the goal which had been set – connecting the Croatian north and south – but because of the psychological effect it would have on the nation, which had for three years already suffered degradation and torture, genocide and culturocide. The Serbs had attacked coastal towns as often as they wished and suffered no consequences. The country was in a state of virtual checkmate. Bobetko wanted to personally command this operation, so he came to Zadar and was on the site for the duration of the battle, from January 22-25. They were bloody and difficult battles with many critical moments when everything could have gone wrong; fortunately, everything turned out well.

The surprise factor was a complete success, and the 4th Guard Brigade and the 1st Guard Company performed their task per plan; however, the forces which had moved out toward Crno, in the direction of Zemunik-Skabrnja, fell behind and their situation became very dangerous. These were mostly volunteers, uneven and poorly trained forces typical of what the Croatian army had at its disposal in this area. At a critical moment, when there was a danger that the Croatian forces could be exposed, Bobetko ordered Ante to personally assume command on the Zemuunik-Skabrnja line.

Things got stuck in Crno, because the chetnik line of defense here was very strong. They controlled the roads Zadar-Maslenica and Zadar-Zemunik from two bunkers. At the same time, they held under firm control the 1000 meter long fields left and right of the road. These fields were only partially covered with low shrubs so that it was difficult to take refuge in them. A charge across this terrain was thus very risky, because they would come under heavy enemy fire from well-protected bunkers.

Ante did have at his disposal a missile system, *Milan*, but his soldiers were not well trained in its use. There was a danger that they could miss and hit an UNPROFOR command center, which was very close by, left of the bunkers. When the battle began, the French had hidden in their cellar, and any lack of precision could have led to a catastrophe. Ante then remembered Roso, who was in the command center in Zadar with Bobetko. He was the only one who understood this particular missile system.

“Listen, I have a job for you here. We can’t go any farther, the chetniks are completely hunkered down in the bunkers, and between us are cleared fields, about 1000 meters long. Yeah, from the Vodovod to Crno. You know the *Milan* system? Excuse me? Yes, of course everything is OK, but the guys in blue are near the bunkers, and it’s too dangerous for my boys. They weren’t in the Legion, they aren’t like you”, Ante explained. Roso laughed at Ante’s last words and said: “I’m on my way!”

As soon as he arrived, he set up the *Milan* a little on the diagonal, and at a distance of about 1500 meters. Then, and as though threading a needle, he took out both chetnik

bunkers. He turned to his old friend, grinning only slightly, and asked: “You need anything else?” “No, that’s it for now”, Ante answered with a similar grin.

When the dust settled, the bunkers were gone. The Serbs couldn’t believe that such a thing had happened to them. They were consumed by panic and their resistance lost its earlier aggressiveness. The fighting lasted a bit longer, but the battle had been decided. Ante entered Crno, and there were no further obstacles to his march to Zemunik.

“When something goes downhill, then it’s a chain reaction. There’s no pretending in war. People sense immediately when something goes wrong, that the line wasn’t broken in time, that someone is late. Soldiers and officers feel naked, because they are no longer sure that they are protected from the right and left flanks, they aren’t sure what’s happening behind them, so they then begin to despair and fall behind in spite of their earlier advances. Like when your shoes come untied during a race. You have to slow down and then stop if you don’t want to lose them completely” he said later about what had happened on the Maslenica battlefield.

“That’s why you have to make sure everything is tight, create a strong command structure with the best officers, organize logistics and everything so that they function faultlessly. And then go forward step by step. Don’t allow anyone to fall behind, go forward like waves on the ocean, pushing, pushing, always there, like an endless sea. This gives people self-confidence and belief in the system. You create from a soldier who

would otherwise stand there not knowing what to do a fighter who charges and takes territory. That's what happened there.”

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The Croatian forces were on such a roll that they liberated the Peruca dam as well, though it was unplanned at this point in time. This was done by diversionaries led by Ante Kotromanovic and Vladimir Benac, soldiers who were filled with enthusiasm and bravery and who wanted to show the world that Croatian soldiers were not on their knees, that they were prepared to perform unexpected tasks on difficult terrain, under difficult circumstances, and from inferior positions, just as the fighters had done on the Zadar territory.

On January 25th at 9am, President Tudjman called Minister Susak, General Bobetko, and Brigadier Gotovina to his office on Pantovcak. He told them that the operation was over, that they should stop where they were, and that the main goals had been achieved. Zadar had been deblocked, the Novsko bottleneck was liberated, and the north and south had been reconnected. Besides this, the pressure from the international community was so strong that it would be counterproductive to continue the operation. Tudjman knew the Croatian forces were still on the offensive and could have liberated Obrovac, but he had still decided to end the operation. He added: “Give me recommendations for decorations and promotions.”

Bobetko was ordered to return to Headquarters, and Ante to tighten positions and security on the terrain and solidify what had been taken. “At your command”, Brigadier Gotovina answered, regarding the Commander in Chief closely. Tudjman seemed to him a man sure of himself, who knew exactly what he was doing, who was energetic and clear, and with whom there could be no discussion. In contrast, Bobetko was concerned, since the Croatian forces were spread out on the battlefield and could become easy prey in the event of a Serb counterattack. And there were clear signs that reinforcements were arriving from all directions - Arkan and Captain Dragan with their special forces, all furious and hungry for revenge, the ignominious defeat eating away at them.

“I’ll send you a unit of the 3rd Guard Brigades, they’re the only ones that can help here,” the old general told Ante. It was clear to Ante that Bobetko was right; it was only a matter of how quickly this unit could be deployed from Slavonia to Zadar. “By helicopter”, said Bobetko. And this was the first time the Croatian army transferred fresh forces by air. In three hours, the unit was in Zadar, the 4th Guard Brigades could breathe a sigh of relief, and Brigadier Gotovina had consolidated the defense.

Who gives a damn about Croatia and Bobetko!

The Serbs were beside themselves because of the Maslenica defeat. Not just because their dream of access to the “three seas” had disintegrated, but because they had not believed that the Croatian army was capable of performing such an operation. So they pulled forces from Bosnia, reinforcements from Serbia, everything they had at their

disposal. They wanted to annul their defeat and retake what they had lost, so they launched eight serious counterattacks and numerous diversionary and provocative actions. The Croatian forces found themselves in a difficult position, perhaps even more difficult than during the Maslenica operation itself, but they held on. Reinforcements arrived, and Ante organized the battlefield into three operative groups (Zadar, Sibenik, Sinj), and within each of three areas he set up a *modular sector system* similar to the one he had implemented on the Livno battlefield. This enabled the defense to be active yet stable. Each sector was given the task of improving its position and security in its area. The entire line, about 250 kilometers long, came to life. In spite of shortages felt during the operation itself and thereafter, the Croatian defense became stronger every day. This Croatian success for some inexplicable reason got under the skin of certain influential and powerful international circles, which put Tudjman under extreme pressure to pull back. The essence of such a proposal was in the imposed UNPROFOR agreement which called upon *both sides* to retreat to two kilometers behind the battle lines and to move heavy weapons to 25 meters from such lines. A *tampon zone* controlled by UNPROFOR would then be created, which would mean for Croatia a return to the pre-Maslenica state of affairs.

Tudjman fumed in his well-known style. He had made all the concessions he felt necessary, taking care not to endanger the basic results of the operation. Serbs helped him in some respects, as they believed that they could return by force what they had lost and showed even less desire to respect the signed agreement. It was a kind of *Rashomon*, the strangest behavior being exhibited by the representatives of the international

community. Sometimes it seemed as though they had personally lost the battle, and that Croatia had rained on their parade.

Even though he was a soldier and made a strong division between politics and the job he performed, Ante was aware of this organic drive to “fix Croatia’s wagon.” Especially on the part of a high-ranking Belgian officer, who was responsible for implementing the agreement on the separation of forces. This general, who came to the meetings from his office in Knin, could barely conceal his antipathy and arrogance. Croats got on his nerves, and their military success burned him personally. Ante smelled opportunity here.

After a few days, he went with General Bobetko to one more dramatic meeting during which UNPROFOR intended to try to force the Croatian side to pull back from Maslenica. A few hours before the meeting, he gave Bobetko an audio cassette, which the old general immediately played. As he listened he turned red, and, suppressing his rage, took the cassette, stuck it in his pocket, and patted it with his hand, as though needing to confirm it was there, safe.

When they arrived at the meeting, Bobetko listened to a few sentences delivered from “on high”, and then said: “Gentlemen, I have something for you. Please do me the favor of listening to this.” He then took out the cassette, on which the Belgian could be heard cursing the Croats and the old general, and saying “who gives a damn about Croatia and Bobetko”, and that Bobetko would see how “things will go once the forces retreat.” Those present, along with the general in question, were frozen. Bobetko asked them

coldly: “Gentlemen, what does this mean?” Everyone was extremely uncomfortable, and the arrogance of the UNPROFOR officer was replaced in an instant by chagrin, bluster, and irrelevant questions: “Where did that come from?” It all ended with his apology. The issue was kept in the meeting room, and UNPROFOR decided on a different solution. It no longer insisted on a separation of forces and the creation of a tampon zone. Especially because Boutros Boutros-Ghali was aware of the situation. It was the end of May and Croatia could finally relax a little.

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The war exhausted people and created situations which in *normal* war conditions would not have been possible. Ante experienced this several times, especially after the Maslenica operation, when the battlefield was still simmering and the Croatian forces lacked weapons and sleep. People did things with the best of intentions that they otherwise would not have considered. And that caused problems. Colonel Ante Skoric, a former special forces member of the JNA, came over to the Croatian side and showed himself to be a good operative. Partially on his own initiative, he tried to procure equipment for a special information system, asking assistance from some businessmen in Split. SIS (military intelligence service) somehow learned of this meeting and wrote up a report which was sent on to General Bobetko. The contents were such that Bobetko told Ante to give Skoric an immediate dishonorable discharge. But when Ante learned from reliable sources what was behind it all, he was sure the general had been misinformed.

He then told him that he could not implement his order, and that he would inform him of his reasons.

“No, implement my order immediately”, Bobetko thundered again after a few days had passed. “General, if this thing has gone so far already, then I would ask that I be brought first, as the officer in charge, before the military court. But I ask that witnesses be called so that we can hear the whole truth”, Ante answered, seeing that he had no other options. Bobetko, who was explosive by nature but sensitive to such gestures, stopped for a moment, not hiding his surprise. But when he had considered this latest information he said: “I see you stand behind your people. That’s good. That’s the way a true commander behaves and gains respect. Anyway, I think you’re right. That report was exaggerated.”

He paused for a moment, as though wanting to give his words extra weight, and then added: “And you know that I value that. That’s what I would have done in that situation!” Then he exhaled and said: “You take care of this matter with Skoric yourself.”

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Captain Zulu was over forty years old, skinny, of medium height and with strong facial features. He had been in the Foreign Legion and had gone through a lot before he began fighting in the Homeland War. He did an excellent job during the Maslenica operation,

and continued to do so afterwards. He was always on the field, under constant pressure the likes of which only commanders on the front lines can know. He was a little depleted and exhausted, as they had little chance to rest and were constantly tense and overextended. This was not the type of soldier's life he had learned in the Legion. It had been difficult there, too, and there had been many difficult situations, but afterwards you were able to rest and relax, recharge empty batteries. Even then the boys would sometimes go nuts and *lose it*. But here? Here they were fighting for different reasons, here nobody was looking for or expecting prizes or awards, here there were no women waiting for them afterwards. When it was hot and heavy, you stayed on the lines as long as necessary. Here you fought with your soul, and the award was victory or enduring the attack. But people were still only people. Sometimes they just exploded, something twisted within them, and they didn't themselves know why.

Zulu was sure everything was under control on his lines, that the boys were disciplined and collected, and that nothing unexpected could or would happen. The chetniks were relatively calm after several days of mayhem, but he felt somehow strange, something was bothering him and causing him unease. Like a man who has to escape from a room he knows too well, fill his lungs with a breath of fresh air.

Zulu set off towards Sibenik from his position somewhere in the Biograd hinterlands to have a drink in some pleasant café, smoke a cigarette, enjoy the civilian atmosphere, the life that seemed to him like a river flowing forward, oblivious to those on its shores.

Somewhere near Pirovac a man riding by in a car saw Zulu by sheer chance. It was his commander.

Zulu turned off the road and went into a café, not knowing that Brigadier Gotovina had recognized him and was following him to see where he was going. “What are you doing here?” Ante asked him sternly after he had entered the café. Zulu was smoking and having a drink, but as soon as he noticed Ante, he got rid of the glass and came to attention as though trying to remedy the situation. “Nothing” he answered, and then added quickly: “Everything’s fine over there, I’m going right back, I just came for a drink.”

“You are a soldier, you know what you’ve done and what the consequences are. Report tomorrow morning to the command post.” Ante said coldly and left. The next morning, at the exact time specified, Zulu appeared at the command post in Zadar. He came obviously prepared for the brig.

“I see everything’s clear to you, you know what you’ve done and what the consequences are. Now go,” said Ante. Zulu responded: “At your command” and went right into the brig.

Some said later that Zulu had even locked himself up, but the only truth is that he stayed in the brig for thirty days. His commander understood well why this officer had left his lines. It was a human reaction, but still could not be tolerated. Discipline in war is

everything, and is defined in terms of commendations or punishment. If you allow only one precedent, the system collapses like a house of cards. Especially under the conditions which existed after Maslenica, when a lot of people *lost it*, but still remained on their lines when superhuman efforts and denial were everyday imperatives. Discipline was not an end in itself but a guarantee of stability, because when a soldier or officer commits such an act, the entire unit is endangered.

“Zulu was a true soldier and he knew what he had done. That’s why he reported ready to accept consequences. Later he exhibited his superior military skills and talent. That is why he was given the rank of colonel,” Ante said when he was asked whether it was true that one of his officers had locked himself up and had stayed in so long because they had forgotten about him. And then he would wave them away, saying: “Forgot about him? No way.”

Did you visit the others, too?

Maslenica was along with everything else a great psychological victory. Proof that the Krajina rebels, though armed to the teeth, were not invulnerable and unbeatable. For an army like Croatia’s this meant more than a hundred of the most modern tanks. It was a feeling that created self-confidence and a victor mentality, without which nothing can be achieved. For this reason, the Serbs launched numerous small and large attacks, hitting Croatian defense lines, deploying diversionaries into the Croatian hinterlands, firing artillery on Zadar, Sibenik, and Sinj...

A week after *Maslenica*, a truck set out from the 3rd Guard Brigade base for Kasic, passing through Islam Grcki and Latinski. In it were soldiers heading for the front lines. Zadar lay behind them, and on the left, the destroyed Maslenica Bridge. They were in full battle gear, but squeezed in like sardines, their weapons between their legs. They could have taken this route by foot or at least exit the truck before the destination point and continue on in battle formation. But they drove on, not thinking of anything in particular except reaching their destination, taking their positions, and holding them until the next shift arrived. They were all hardened warriors, but exhausted from continual fighting and perhaps a bit too relaxed and sure of themselves. When they entered Kasic, Serbian diversionaries appeared before them. The soldiers had neither time nor opportunity to react: they were hit and immediately fell into the clutches of the enemy. Fifteen of them. Before the cold breath of Fate touched them, they were thrown against a wall by the Serbs. Dull blasts could be heard, two at a time. All of them were liquidated, every last one, the way an executioner kills his victim. Without a lot of words and action, quick, and with precision.

Only three days later, Serb diversionaries entered the Kasic battlefield itself, and a difficult and bloody hand to hand battle ensued, during which they suffered losses but also killed eight Croatian soldiers from the same brigade. This was a tragedy for the unit; a fate often paid by a victor who is capable, but not enough to be able to dictate the development of the situation on the ground. The enemy gives you only enough breathing space and time to think about your own defense and reserve positions. Maslenica was a

glorious victory, but the number of victims was not small; all in all about 100 Croatian fighters during and in the months following the operation.

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Spring in Dalmatia is like the lapping of waves which announce a *bura*. It hints of summer, of heat and pinions which smell of pitch: dry and tart, but also intoxicating. In April or May, when the wind blows, it carries a whiff of the July and August perfume with it, dispersing it and making it even more seductive. But this spring there was a heaviness in the air which destroyed this wonderful synthesis. On one such evening, sometime before midnight, a 35 year old defender returned from his position on the Vransko Lake where he had just deployed fresh troops in the nearby mountains. He was alone in the jeep, and singing to himself, as he was a cheerful and happy person by nature. And garrulous; he liked to play around with words. His voice was somewhat gruff, partly from smoking, but it fit his personality perfectly. He was a huge guy, not tall, but powerful and stocky. People loved him for his many fine qualities, and for the good common sense which never left him. He was driving toward Pakostan, thinking about his wife who was very concerned for him, but always said her farewells to him with a smile, as though he were going down to the fish market.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the strafing of a Kalashnikov. Bullets hit the jeep's metal, resounding like gravel pounding down on a roof. And then the man at the wheel felt a powerful blow to his right leg, just above the knee. The bullet went through the

bone and tore the muscles and tendons, twisting his calf into a 90 degree angle. The pain traveled to his brain and then disappeared with the speed of lightning. Perhaps because just then a second bullet hit his right hand, just below the elbow, causing massive bleeding. Then he was hit a third time in the left calf, which was as painful as being flayed by a whip. Then a fourth, in the back, the shoulder blade. He was reeling like a punch-drunk boxer.

He continued to drive and even succeeded in turning out the lights, but he hardly knew what he was doing. Pain had paralyzed his body and brain; then it would disappear suddenly and return just as quickly. Sometimes it seemed that he was dreaming and that nothing had really happened. And then the weakness again, and his consciousness began to fade. He fought to keep his vision clear and to get as far away as possible from the Kalashnikov. He knew he had fallen into a Serb diversionary ambush. The jeep, which was moaning along with him, stopped after two kilometers. It was shot through like an old pot and was leaking gas and water.

The driver extricated himself, lay down on the road and, as though this were all amusing to him, said: “Thank God there was something that took more bullets than I did tonight.” Then he felt good, nothing hurt him any longer. He was just sleepy. Sleep was sweet and irresistible, like the call of an enchanted mermaid. His will, which had kept him at the wheel just moments before, changed into a strange weightiness which pressed him to the ground, not allowing him to move. As though the sky had settled upon him. He was losing blood, his blood pressure had fallen, and his eyes were heavy. He wanted to die.

And then, as though someone had poked a thick needle into his skin, he began to think: “What will happen to my wife if I just fall asleep and die? She’s going to have to grovel to get someone to come and cut wood for her.” This activated him and awakened within him all the feeble strength a poor body could have after losing so much blood and suffering so many wounds. He began to crawl like a wild animal through the bushes and shrubs, pulling himself to a hill. He gathered his last bit of strength and rolled himself down the hill like a log. His comrades were down below. They had heard the shots and had gone to see what was happening. He was saved, but just in the nick of time.

He had a very rare blood type (B negative), so there was no life-saving blood supply immediately available. He almost bled to death. The doctors were amazed that he survived, saying that he was saved not only by his bull-like strength, but by his determination not to fall asleep when anyone else would have in his situation.

The news that this man had almost died spread quickly throughout the Zadar region. People began to say: “Did you hear that Brigadier Ante’s brother was wounded? Yes, the Ante Gotovina that commanded the *Maslenica* operation!” And then they would add: “Imagine, his brother was wounded and he didn’t even go see him first. He went to see others! What kind of guy is he, for God’s sake?”

When he heard his brother Boro had been wounded and was in mortal danger of losing his life, Ante felt the same kind of pressure in his heart he had felt when he remembered

his deceased mother. This was his younger brother whom he loved, but he didn't think a lot about these feelings and never tried to express them. Now that Boro was wounded, he felt a deep unease and concern. But he was unable to go immediately to his brother in the hospital, because others were wounded and he was commander to them all. Those were difficult days. Blood was flowing on a regular basis because of the *Maslenica* operation. The Serbs were attacking everywhere, and in revenge they launched several grenade attacks on Pakostan. He was convinced that he had to visit other wounded soldiers; in fact, that he should visit them first in order to show that every soldier was equally valuable, that there were no exceptions or privileges. Even as his brother lay in intensive care, shot through with bullets like a Swiss cheese. And this is what he did. He went to Boro last. When he arrived, this big bull of a man asked him: "Have you visited the others?" Ante nodded his head and asked him: "So, how are you?"

Intelligence and intuition

War is like mathematics in a way. If you want to be successful, you have to know how to resolve equations with one or more unknown factors. So a good commander must above all be able to evaluate the enemy. The strength and deployment of its units, morale and battle readiness, and the technology at its disposal. This cannot happen without strong intelligence, which includes eavesdropping systems, unpiloted planes, and investigations. He must also be capable of evaluating his own forces: what he really has on hand, which soldier, which type of firepower he can depend upon, the state of his armor, his light weaponry. Then he gauges his and the enemy's forces, seeking the weaknesses and

strengths. When all this gels in his mind, taking into consideration the results he has thus far achieved, he draws up a plan to reach the goal. The goal is set, of course, by the politicians, and the commander gives the green light for this or that operation; but it is the soldier that realizes it.

The concept of the operation determines the tactics. It is a kind of conceptual blueprint. Just as the architect provides a concept for a structure, which is then worked out by his assistants in various versions, so does the commander provide a concept of the operation, and his headquarters then implements it technically. From these blueprints emerge the organization which then results in a budget for the structure. How much is needed of everything, from materials to people. But the difference between an architect and commander is that the commander always has a reserve plan, a secret plan. This is a plan unknown to anybody and which the commander can implement – which is usually the case – when the battle begins. At that time, in contrast to the official plan, he can change the direction of attack, determine that the main attack take place elsewhere, and deploy reserves in places they had not been foreseen.

And Ante always had a secret plan. Not just in order to prevent the enemy from learning what was being planned, but because this was an essential element of waging war. War was not a science, and no advance plan could determine the course of the battle and be so perfect that certain doubts did not remain. So Ante knew well that there were always dilemmas and worries, sleepless nights and questions: What if this or that happens? What if the enemy does this?

Besides, you can plan everything perfectly and then, when you launch the attack, a heavy fog might fall so you can't use your cannons. Or it rains all night long and the ground is soggy, so you can't use your armor and technology the way you had planned. What then? Sometimes he began to deeply doubt everything just a few hours before the battle began. It seemed to him that his plan was stupid and that there were better, more effective ideas. He would sweat and toss and turn in bed, tortured by doubt and uncertainty. And then the thought that he could always change things if they started to go bad would calm him, and give him strength. Then his confidence would return.

This pre-battle trauma, this fever that attacks one's self-confidence plagued even the most seasoned commanders. "The experience of Napoleon, the experience of Napoleon" he would say to himself at such moments. And then he would repeat in his mind the conversation this great commander would have with his advisers before major battles. He wanted the best commanders, so he asked before every battle who would be best for this or that assignment. If several advisers – who would usually come to the Emperor or commander individually – mentioned the same name, Napoleon would ask: "OK, now which unit did he command last?" When he heard the answer, he continued: "And did he win, lose, or come out with an undecided result?" And then: "How did he plan the operation and how much luck was involved?" After they told him, he would answer: "When I give the order to begin the battle, the plans of my best generals almost never mean a thing. But I have to have some kind of plan to prepare for battle and to win it."

This war philosophy was near to Ante's way of thinking; he saw in it two indivisible elements without which there were no great battles or victories: the analytical and intuitive approach. The first was important before the battle and the second when the battle began, when the air was thick with gunpowder and when your blood boiled and drove the brain in one direction: toward victory or death.

“You prepare for battle with intelligence and lead it with intuition”, he would say when they would ask him after the battle why he had done something that had not been planned. And would continue: “Hey, gentlemen, what can you do with your plan if you see that when the battle begins your unit is going out with negative energy – which may be justified - lack of will and impetus? Without the *elan* and enthusiasm they have shown a hundred times before and which you had counted on? See, then you have to react fast, feel out the situation, and change the plan quickly because your enemy won't wait. And then God rewards you if you do it well. The unit with the negative energy pulls itself together, resolves its problem, and then fights better than all units in the end. There's nothing so important in war as positive energy, belief in victory, the psychology of the victor. Communicating this successfully to your soldiers and units shows the greatness of the commander. This also is intuition, not some false conceit or bluster. This belief and security is like a light illuminating the way into the darkness of uncertainty that is present in every battle. And after the battle? Then an honest analysis is most important. See what was good and what was not, what succeeded and what didn't. Only from negative experience can you learn something, profit, and become better.”

Maslenica was the first big military operation in which land, naval, and air forces combined to illustrate the potential of the Croatian army. It was a absolute political and psychological success, but not a 100% military success. Ante was well aware of this.

President Tudjman had ordered the liberation of the Novska pass and the deblockade of Zadar. This he had done. But where the Croatian forces would stop their push, and which positions they would assume could not be determined by the Commander in Chief, as this was dictated by the terrain on which the battle was being waged. And on this point the optimum had not been achieved. The Croatian units had failed to assume the most advantageous positions on the Velebit mountains and around Krusevo. This had nothing to do with bravery or enthusiasm, because they had an excess of both in this war. It was due to skill and knowledge. Commanders of the smaller units did not have at their disposal the knowledge necessary to implement the operational plan on a tactical maneuvering level. These are deficiencies that appeared even after the main operations and spoke to the fact that without absolute professionalism and the highest qualifications among the junior officers' cadres, and in part the officers' as well, there would be no major successes. Because only those who possess such knowledge and military skills can pass them on the regular soldier.

In the case of the Croatian army, educating the soldier was even more important than it would have been in other armies. Because their technology was inadequate and obsolete, they had to depend upon manpower, on each other. "When the Americans destroy and

flatten everything around them with their deadly technology, it's easy for one of their soldiers to stroll in and occupy whatever he wants. No great enthusiasm or skill is needed here, because technological superiority will make up for any eventual weaknesses. But if you don't have any of that technology, then your only wealth is in your officer and his soldier. The foot soldier who has gained military skills and knows how to maneuver on the terrain", Ante would say. And then would add: "But our advantage is that all these people have passed through a christening by fire, they have been hardened in war, are full of enthusiasm and more than determined. They just have to be prepared for offensive actions and victory."

From his many years of experience he knew this was only possible if a true training center were created, the likes of which large world armies have. He had passed through such a center and had been an instructor as well. This idea began to plague him; he felt like a fiery writer whose story was pushing him forward before he had even set pen to paper. If an army of Croatian officers and junior officers passed through such a center and mastered all the knowledge and skills, gained endurance and strength, and became accustomed to a discipline that admits no emotion or weakness but only the will to perform one's assignment, then this soldier and his unit will exhibit the same qualities. He will know how to wage war utilizing the rules of the trade and perform every task. Without this capability, all good ideas and plans are just phantoms in the wind.

He began searching for a location for such a center in his mind; he built a imaginary polygon, dreamt of the day the ideas would be realized. Especially when the French gave

him a very reliable signal that they would be willing and even glad to assist. They would, say, give their instructors who would teach the first generation of junior officers and officers and also the first generation of Croatian instructors. Without them, the center would be like a soccer team without a trainer. An exercise area for intermediates.

Most important was to acquaint key people with this idea: the Minister of Defense, Gojko Susak, and General Janko Bobetko, who was at that time the Head of the Joint Chiefs. He knew he had to use specific tactics, like a salesman promoting his wares. That meant behaving in such a way that the buyer did not feel pressured or manipulated but reached a decision on his own to buy something that had been brought out almost unnoticed from the storeroom. Susak immediately understood the idea and told Miroslav Tudjman, the then head of the Croatian Intelligence Service, about it. Since foreigners were involved, these two had to be involved.

A meeting attended by all four was held that night. Bobetko gave the introduction and then Ante spoke about the details. About how important it was to build such a center for training special forces, with polygons, airfield, and simulation systems, so that within a year, several hundred highly qualified commanders could be trained.

The younger Tudjman took the responsibility of fixing everything with the French. Somewhere around the end of May 1993, a meeting was held in his Zagreb offices with the French Ministry of Defense delegation. Gotovina asked for 20 instructors and the head of the French delegation, a suave officer, told him: “Dear colleague, I am happy to

have met you, but we can only give you 15 instructors.” Ante had not expected more than this, so answered calmly: “If you can only supply so many, then that’s sufficient.” And that’s how Sepurina came into existence. A professional officer’s factory, an incubator of the modern Croatian military spirit and great victories.

In only 30 days all the building was done for Sepurina, and in three months, they had an airfield. Werner Ilic became the first commander, and the French instructors got their first hundred men, fifty of the best going on to the second phase: courses for assistant instructors. Of those fifty, twenty of the best trained for instructor. Later these outstanding instructors possessed the qualifications to perform all types of special actions, similar to what Ante had learned in the Foreign Legion.

The Guard Brigades sent their best boys to Sepurina, 25 from each, but only 15 of the best remained. The selection process was horrendous, as was the training. The Croatian army had gained a new, astonishing dimension. Without any hullabaloo and far from the eyes of the public.

Phenomenal material, these Croats!

Damir Tomljanovic Gavran was the epitome of the Croatian soldier, sprouted from the soil of the War of the Homeland. Young, vibrant, brave, eager to learn and achieve new skills, disciplined, and a participant in many difficult battles. He began as a member of the special police forces, and then went over to the 1st Brigade of the ZNG. From a

regular guard member he went to a diversionary, and then to commander of a guard unit with the rank of colonel. But he wanted to go to Sepurina, the hellish forger of the Croatian guard infantry units. He dreamt about being first in his class, of jumping the last hurdle, after which he would be bathed in glory. Because the point was to go for it, that's why you became a specialist, revered by all the armies of the world! But Gavran had bad luck. He died on Velebit a month before spring of 1994.

He was crossing his zone of responsibility at a spot where the Tulove Grede jut out, and where the stone columns of the Velebit descend into the abyss below. He was strafed by Serbian automatic weapons, P.K.T., which were used against infantry as well as airplanes and helicopters.

The 12,7 caliber bullet hit him right in the temple. He died twenty minutes later, not even knowing he had been hit. After his death, his mother said: "I didn't know my son had so much authority in the Croatian army and that so many people loved him!"

Several months later, when the first men started coming to Sepurina, waiting for them at the entrance was a big sign bearing Gavran's name. The *Guard Center for Special Officers' Training* was named after him; thus the spirit of this Croatian fighter had gotten closure the same way as a wise thought when it is written down.

Ante had thought long and hard about the location before settling on the former missile center of the JNA. Sepurina had no real competition for various reasons. The center,

which was 1x2 kilometers in size, was surrounded on the southwest by the sea, and from the northeast by the Velebit mountains. It had everything, sea and land, mountains and air. Similar to base 2 of the R.E.P. in Calvi. It was dissected into two parts by the airfield which was 2,000 meters long, and had been built in record time, in only three months. The fact that the Americans used it for their airplanes, and even unpiloted planes during the war in Bosnia and later, speaks to its high quality. Left of the runway were hangars with complete technology for air deployments and hovering, and somewhat farther away were buildings which housed people and command posts. The right side toward the sea was reserved for shooting, infantry weaponry, and anti-tank systems. Here also were the polygons with 67 obstacles and objects, including the risk polygon and the 150 meter long underwater polygon.

Written on one of the approximately 10 feet high wooden objects which was used to practice fighting with urban units was: “Sweat saves blood.” And there was no lack of sweat in Sepurina. The boys had to run 8 kilometers every day, in full battle gear, and afterwards continue on the polygons and obstacles without pause, as though they had just begun. Climb 7-8 meters up a rope to the close range battle object, and then overcome a series of difficult obstacles, then climb again, jump into a cement ditch deeper than two meters with sand at the bottom, and then get out of it without help from anyone. And on to the risk polygon. This was the polygon they called “polygon for commandos.” It was 10 meters high, and the inside was the shape of a chimney, but wide enough for a man to enter it. The future commandos had to climb ten meters up this chimney, supporting themselves against the stone with only their hands and feet. When they came to the top,

still in full battle gear, they had to jump onto an iron pole more than a meter and a half away from the chimney object. Then let themselves down. Then up again, 10 meters in the air, on a thin pole attached to the outer wall of the chimney, and then a jump onto another iron pole more than a meter and a half from the wall. And then up again, without pause or catching your breath. Then onto a metal cable, and then down the cable using your hands all the way to the sea, about 100 meters away. Then into the sea like a dolphin, and then 50 meters underwater through various obstacles. Only then were you done for the day. And that's how it went for 2-3 months without pause, depending on which course you were taking. Without going into town, without warm water and heat.

In the dead of winter and middle of summer the boys slept in wooden barracks made of thin boards, without insulation, except perhaps for newspapers or nylon so that the rain wouldn't get through during storms. Everything was done in order to make them as tough as Dalmatian stone, as fit as Schwarzenegger, as unyielding as doom.

The Croatian soldier's worth was determined by the number of books he had read, General Roso once said, and this certainly applied to the boys at Sepurina. Here you worked with your brain as well as your body, you studied and gained knowledge. The spirit appeared here in the strangest way: by *overeducation*. After you passed through Sepurina, you were not the same person you were before Sepurina. A new spirit was forged, a new mental orientation planted with the seeds of future Flashes (Bljesak) and Storms (Oluja).

Traditional Croatian military values and recent accomplishments were combined here in such a way as to leave nobody unaffected, not even the most critical of the foreign experts. “This is real material” one of the American officers said, enthused with what he had seen. After all, no army in the world could march as far as the boys from Sepurina. 250 kilometers in full battle gear in only five days. The Foreign Legion had a 170 kilometer march; other armies even fewer. Foreign military envoys who had observed all this, the beginning of training, its courses, and the march at the end reported the same thing as the American: “Really phenomenal, the material the Croatians have at their disposal.” Even President Tudjman was enthusiastic. When he came the first time to Sepurina, the future commanders’ detachment executed a parachute deployment. Perfectly and exceptionally. He turned to Ante and in his typical manner, as though his joy were suppressed deep inside him and did not allow him to speak casually, “That’s it! That’s it! Keep it up!”

Sepurina had a particular psychological significance: it pleased Croatia’s friends, impressed the Croatian people, and scared Croatia’s enemies. It wasn’t the kind of media bluff with which “Colonels” Dragan and Arkan misled the Serbian public: a small polygon, a few “ferocious” fighters, and a glut of journalists and photographers. No, Sepurina had content plus results! 900-1000 junior officers passed through it, among them Jasen Drnasin, who had come as a regular inspector, completed special training for commandos, and later attended the renowned West Point. And high ranking officers as well, such as the later General Damir Krsticevic.

Or the captain and later war invalid Vladimir Benac, an engineer of slight build and height who looked almost tiny in comparison with the other hulks who typically applied to Sepurina, but was superior to many in intelligence and heart. He completed the specialist courses, could use all types of weaponry as well as James Bond, and was without competition in survival skills. Three days on a barren island without anything but matches, a knife, and a weapon without bullets, presented no problem to him. He came to Sepurina with the reputation of having been the first one after the *Maslenica* operation to enter the hydrocenter of Peruca dam, which was mined and could have exploded at any minute. Nobody else had dared to do this. Later, when he had Sepurina behind him, he was badly hurt in Drvar. He would surely have died if his warrior instincts had not saved him. Only a few had these instincts, which could not be learned anywhere; they were simply a gift from God.

This is the instinct of the born warrior and these are the only types that can really fight; they are the only ones who really know how. You can mobilize 2000-3000 people, even a million, but only a special type of person, only about 20-30,000 of them, will give it all they have. Victory or defeat, success or failure is dependent above all on these soldiers. It's always the same ones who carry these difficult skills in their blood, this natural authority; they are able to x-ray into the psyche of their fellow fighters and drive them to follow, to obey. Like in a den of foxes where the alpha wolf leads and dominates. His nature has given him the strength, instinct, and spiritual energy upon which the Fate of the community depends.

Benac had gone out on inspection in a jeep. All of a sudden he sensed that something was wrong. He didn't see or hear anything, but had a strange feeling, a tingling he couldn't really place but which became more obvious with every moment. And then something cramped within him and discharged itself like a bullet. He jumped out of the jeep as though jumping into a swimming pool. But luck would not have it so. His leg got stuck; his body was on the ground, his leg in the jeep. At the same time, a *maljutka* flew in from a distance, a type of anti-armor rocket: it made a direct hit on the jeep. The jeep burst into flames, and so did Benac's leg. Another piece of bad luck was that there had been thick fog that day and the helicopter could not get to him. He had to wait more than two hours in that condition, fighting the pain and the need to sleep or lose consciousness. He spoke to Ante through the communication system, the motorola; Ante reassured him, told him to stay awake, to hold out and be strong because: "we're on our way." And since Benac was the type to turn everything into a joke, he said he had been lucky, and that he could have been burned up or worse, which would have been more tragic than just losing a leg.

We might not be here tomorrow

Months and then years passed. Ante had actually told himself: "I'll go to Croatia to see what's happening; I haven't been home for a long time." Ximena knew it would be awhile before he returned. She was used to long and frequent separations. She never asked him when he would return, because she knew it wouldn't do any good. "He'll come when he's finished with his assignment", she would tell herself. And Ante would

call her on the telephone every 2-3 weeks, and they would talk about everything except work and his return. That's the way it had been since he had left for Croatia.

Ximena had become a journalist in the meantime, working mostly for Galavision, so she was aware of what was happening in her husband's homeland. "He'll come as soon as the situation calms down", she would tell her daughter when she would ask when her dad was finally coming. Ante was thinking that day would come, maybe even sooner than he expected, but it was more important to him that his wife and daughter had everything they needed and that there was nothing he had to worry about happening in Colombia. Then he would immerse himself in the Croatian situation as though he had never been anywhere else. War was like this. It consumes you completely, puts you into a special state: psychologically, physically, and emotionally. As much as you try to stay "normal", you almost never succeed. Because joy, longing, or sadness in war is not the sadness we know in peacetime. It's not a matter of intensity, hyper-sensitivity or becoming accustomed to the rawness of daily events. It's just a different state of mind.

And love is different in war. The yearning is more intense, as though you're searching for a part of you that war has suppressed or refuses to recognize. A kind of melancholy transformed into passion; it's like the sadness of lost youth, which becomes a source of satisfaction in the mature man. It gets all twisted around when someone looks at you with burning eyes which seem to say: "What are you waiting for, take me, we might not be here tomorrow."

Something like this happened to Ante in Zadar, with the journalist Vesna Karuza. They saw each other as often as possible, knowing that they might not be around the next day. At the end of 1994, she bore him a baby daughter that Ante named Ana, after his mother. Ana was christened in a Zagreb church, carried his name, and enjoyed all the rights and benefits a father could give his child. But he remained just friends with Vesna. He was unable to do otherwise; perhaps this is what he wanted.

“Sometimes when things happen, you just have to tell yourself it happened and it’s over” he told himself, and then picked up the telephone and called Bogota. Little Ximena answered, and he asked for her mother, who was not home. “I wanted to tell mommy something, but you can tell her. You have a baby sister who was just born in Zagreb. Her name is Ana, like your grandmother. I’ll send you pictures in the next letter, you’ll see how sweet she is.” She listened with the joy of a child who believes this will all be great fun, and then added: “I can hardly wait to tell mama.”

He tried many more times to call the older Ximena, but he had no luck. She didn’t answer the phone or the messages he left, and did not write. It was as though she had climbed up an avocado tree again, had nobody to bring her down, and didn’t care whether she got ill or not. This hurt Ante; he knew it was serious, but he secretly hoped that everything would be worked out in the end. “As soon as the war is over, I will go to Colombia, and when Ximena has another child, everything will smooth itself out. After all, Colombian women are like that. If they see that you love them, they forgive you,” he

told himself in those rare moments when he was alone. But the war did not end quickly. And then time took its toll. Everything lasts twice as long in wartime.

Winter of 1994

Ante was promoted to Lieutenant General in 1994 on Croatian Independence Day. But the regular soldier was still alive within him. And with that the instincts that could never betray him. Every soldier knows whether his commander is sure of himself or not before a battle, whether he is wavering, indecisive, or uncertain. Soldiers sense this the same way a good card player can pick up on a bluff. When this happens, it is as though the unit has been infected with the plague. Half the battle is lost before the first shot is fired. The opposite also applies. If a commander radiates positive energy and can communicate it to those under him, then half the battle is already won. “That’s the way it is”, Ante would say “there’s no bluffing in war; everyone is as naked as the day his mother bore him. Fear and courage, decisiveness and indecision. People sense it. I know the soldier, I know him.” And then he would fall silent and think: “My God, man is so remarkable. You hear the sound of a detonation and sense that the cannon is mishitting, you check it out, and find out you are right. That’s the feeling I’m talking about..so how can anyone think they can fool a soldier?”

That morning, November 29, 1994, the Dinaric and Livno ranges were blanketed with deep snow and fog. The cannons couldn’t hit accurately and, due to the difficult terrain, the technology wasn’t able to make any progress, either. Though he had been counting

on cannon support, Ante quickly decided on a change of plan. “Listen, gentlemen, these weather conditions, the fog and snow, are going to be our allies and their enemies” he told his commanders with a self-confidence that gave his words an indisputable authority. “And you are being asked to make use of these advantages. This operation is going to succeed and the losses are going to be minimal.”

Then he ordered them to surprise the enemy with the infiltration of strong but very mobile inspection-diversionary units. These penetrations of the enemy hinterland were as painful and surprising to the enemy as a shot in the butt with a sharp needle. The chetniks, who were sleeping in abandoned houses throughout the scattered Dinaric and Livanjski villages, never dreamed anyone would be so crazy as to attack under such weather conditions. They were sleeping peacefully next to warm wood stoves, believing that the winter and terrible weather conditions would protect them. And then the shock: as though they had fallen from the sky, the diversionaries – who were two companies strong – shot throughout the Dinaric and Livno mountains like billiard balls. The chetniks didn’t even have a chance to wake up, but began to flee in panic, leaving behind them their cannons and armor; many even left their boots. The surprise was total, and with it came a big psychological advantage in those first hours of Operation Winter, 1994.

“General, my forces are exhausted and can hardly hold up any longer. Why don’t you deploy the reserve forces of the 4th Guard Brigades?” one of the exhausted commanders of a unit attacking toward Vjestic Gori asked Ante. These were the first hours of the

attack, when everyone was on foot with their weaponry - since the technology could not operate due to the fog and snow -, when the soldiers were using themselves up like flickering candles. Everything gets extremely tense at such moments, so it is up to the head commander to take steps. The General knew the seriousness of the situation, so he listened quietly to his upset officer, and then, speaking slowly, as though he had all the time in the world, explained why the reserve forces were important. Adding: "Listen to me well, I know what kind of situation you are in, but you and your soldiers have been trained specifically for such situations. Why else were you in Sepurina? Huh? Not to give up on the first day! Besides that, you chose to become a warrior, nobody forced you, so now behave like one. As far as reserve troops are concerned, they'll be showing up at the right time, and that will allow us to achieve our final goal."

Then he became quiet for a moment, looked at the officer, who appeared calmer, and continued: "Why are you protesting now? Didn't you always used to complain when the guards were given precedence? Now you have a chance to show you're as good as they are. Prove that the home forces are as good as the guards when they are well-trained."

These words had a strong effect on the officer, as though a heavy burden had been lifted from him. He smiled, said curtly: "At your command", and returned to the battlefield. Later he showed himself to be one of the best commanders the Croatian army had ever produced. So good that he himself became commander of the 4th Guard Brigade!

In November of his same year, the forces of the HVO liberated Kupres in Operation Cincar. Minister Susak came and drank a coffee there, but was convinced that they shouldn't stop their advance if they wanted to hold Kupres. The Serbs had concentrated strong forces in this area, so it was critical to take the heights from both sides of Kupres toward the Vrbas River and the Cincar mountains in order to be able to defend the city. Besides, the battlefield needed to be extended from the Livno plains to the Dinar range for tactical-strategic reasons, so they could disperse the enemy forces and weaken the pressure on Kupres. Besides, the Bosnian and Croatian Serbs allied with Fikret Abdic's forces had begun an offensive on Bihac at the end of November, intending to destroy the 5th Corps of the BH Army and HVO forces there, which were defending the city. If they had succeeded, the "SAO Krajina" and "Republic of Serbia" would have physically merged and that would have been a mortal danger to Croatia. So Susak organized a meeting in Trilj, in the Saint Mihovil Hotel, which was attended by the head of the HVO forces, General Blaskic, head of the HV forces, General Janko Bobetko, and General Gotovina, commander of the Split area. They saw immediately that they lacked the forces for a broader HVO operation, so they decided that the Split forces would do most of the work in the Dinar and Livno areas. This decision proved later to be of vital, strategic significance, as it made possible the liberation of Knin and then Bihac, and the *Maestral* and *Southern Stroke* operations.

Ante was given the task by Bobetko of working out various possibilities for connecting the HV and HVO forces around Kupres and, in collaboration with them, weakening the offensive on Bihac and creating a more advantageous operative and strategic position.

Since he knew this terrain, the units, and their commanders from 1992, he was called to Trilj again a week later to attend a meeting organized by Minister Susak.

General Blaskic presented his part of the plan first; then came Ante and then Susak, who listened carefully to the questions Blaskic posed, asking: “So do you agree with that, Bobetko?” “As far as the HV is concerned, I agree”, the old general answered brusquely. Susak fidgeted around in his chair, as though his whole body were itching, and then said: “OK, be prepared, I will give you the signal for the operation.”

Ante discreetly moved his command center from Zadar to Sinj and then to Livno, where conditions were better, in preparation for this offensive operation. He just as discreetly moved units to the Dinar and Livno plains. But in spite of initial successes, especially when the 4th and 5th Guard Brigades were deployed, things got stuck December 10 on the right flank of the Livno plains, where the HVO was under the command of General Blaskic. The forces on the Dinar and the left flank of the Livno plains were moving fast and dangerously, hitting the enemy units with such force and precision that they were unable to respond.

But the HVO got stuck, thereby endangering the right flank of these forces, which could have been very dangerous. Fog and bad weather were an advantage, but if the enemy had sensed this weak point, they could have attacked Ante from the left and endangered the units on the Dinars. So he called an urgent meeting with Blaskic, after which Bobetko acquainted himself with the situation on the ground.

Afterward, there was a meeting with Susak in Suici, and thereafter, Ante took all forces under his command, even the ones on the right flank of the Livno plains. From that point on, there were no more surprises, and the Croatian forces were unstoppable and better equipped, with more armor, cannons, and troops. After 27 days, which was how long the operation lasted, 200 kilometers of territory had been liberated (Livno plains, along with Veliki and Mali Goliji, and important points on the Dinars).

But victories in war are only victories if you are able to hold the territory you have taken. This was not easy on the Dinar and Livno plains, due to the difficult terrain and the deadly weather conditions. The cold and winds were so vicious that people simply couldn't endure. In addition, constant attacks by the defeated Serbs presented the possibility of soldiers being wounded and then bleeding to death. Because coming down off the Dinar mountains took hours. "Here logistics is everything. And you don't have any unless your engineering doesn't do its part: break through the paths so that the technology, reinforcements, supplies, medics, and ammunition can get through. See, we did this in the Dinars, 75 kilometers of paths the tanks could travel on," General Gotovina had told a journalist much later, when he had been asked how they survived the winter in these mountains.

Christmas in the Dinar Mountains

If the desert kills with sandstorms and heat, the Dinars kill with snow and freezing winds. These mountains aren't particularly high, but they are cruel: they fight to keep people off their peaks and fight even harder to prevent them from descending. The high peaks exhaust your strength and the winds that freeze the marrow in your bones also deplete your soul. When everything calms down and you feel as though time and air has stopped and the snow glitters like diamonds on these clear nights, then the Dinar mountains are the most dangerous.

These still, clear, and cold nights can kill the soldier. If he's snuggled into his uniform and feels the warmth of his own body flowing toward his chest from his belt, it seems as though he has entered Nirvana. The cold touches his cheeks like marble and he slowly rests his head on the cold, tricked by his inner warmth and the snowy "metaphysics". When he is found, he still has the same smile on his face that he had when he drifted away, his fingers and toes so frozen that they cannot be separated from his gloves and socks. If he is lucky and survives, it is often without hands or feet. There were about twenty such cases in the Dinar mountains during and after Operation Winter 1994. The commanders actually went to see the boys on the front lines more often than was usual, but it still happened. The Dinar mountains never forgave you for underestimating them.

On Christmas Eve, Operation Winter 1994 was halted. As always, Ante decided to spend this night with his soldiers. This was not a calculated move; rather, he had a natural desire to be with the boys. "The army is a family" he was known to say, "in which all are equal, and each has a specific role. In normal times, the commander performs tasks that

takes him away from the boys on the front line, but during Christmas, Easter, and New Year's you are with them. You couldn't feel the magical sense and purpose of these days and the coming year any better in any cathedral in the world. The front lines are where you gather your family on Christmas Eve, that's where you should be.”

It was about 11pm on a cold, clear and snowy night. Ante went up with some local commanders to Vjestic Gori, which had been taken by some of his forces during the past few weeks. The boys, who were from Unit 4 Guard Brigades, were gathered around a fire. The enemy was not able to see the fire, though it was big enough to warm 12 people. Some were standing, some sitting, murmuring could be heard, the crackling of meat over the fire. One boy who had just returned from the front lines was as furious as a hornet.

He was cursing loudly, and was mad at everybody and everything. Maybe the cold had wrung him out and he was getting unexpected, but unfocused, energy from the fire. Maybe he was upset that he hadn't been home in months, especially on this day when the normal world was with loved ones, wives, children. Who knows? The boy continued cursing and complaining, and then he would provoke someone. He didn't notice Ante as he approached the fire; neither did the others at first. Fire somehow robs you of your concentration, because someone is always coming or going. “So what? Fuck them all. My ass is frozen and who knows how long this is going to last. Fuck them all, Susak, Gotovina, and Tudjman....”

The boy was on a roll. Ante listened to him quietly, while others around the fire who realized their general had come tried to signal to the boy to ease up. But he got even more excited instead, which began to amuse the others to such a degree that he became suspicious. Like an audience listening to a horrendous play, which is getting worse by the minute, with a straight face instead of a grimace.

Then he turned around and saw the general standing behind him. He straightened up immediately, squirmed around a bit, and then smiled, stuttering: “Commander, have something with us, here’s some bacon and meat spread, and we’ve got baked bread, too. Hey give me that stick!” he said to one of the boys who was just taking his piece of meat from the fire. Ante approached the fire, squatted down, took a piece of bread and bacon, and, before biting into it, looked at the one who had been cursing and who was squatting next to him, and asked: “It must be really tough on you if you’re so mad.” And before he could answer, continued: “I’m sure it is. I know how it is. But tell me, would it be easier if I would have some girls waiting for you here when you come from the front lines?”

When he said this, the boy blurted out enthusiastically: “Hey, if that were the case, we’d stay here till spring!” “Till spring, you say!” Ante said, and then continued with a calm and quiet voice: “You see, you’d stay here for a girl a few months more, but for your homeland, it’s too hard for you and you go nuts. Is that right?”

The boy didn't answer immediately; he bent his head, and then raised it again, saying in an almost reverential tone of voice: "Commander, you know that's not so, I just lost it for a minute. You know how it is when your nerves are shot." Ante said nothing more, and the others began quizzing him about the action, new offensive, leaves and so forth. He stayed awhile longer, feeling as though this were a special Christmas Eve on the peaks of the Dinars with these boys. All as different as grains of sand on the beach, and all somehow the same. Soldiers like him.

That same night he visited other isolated places on the battlefield, and in the early morning hours he was already on the Velebit mountains, on the peak looking toward Tulove Grede. By the end of Christmas, he had visited the entire line, feeling each time as though it were the first. In war, man came face to face with his fellow man; there was no pretense and you were what you were: no more, no less. Silence around the fire could be just as rich and expressive as the most touching song or prayer in the cathedral.

He was only able to get some time alone the second day, late at night. The Christmas holidays had always been special to him. At that time he would remember his mother, imagine her looking down at him and smiling benevolently. Especially on Christmas. Then he regarded his mother from a child's perspective. It somehow went with this day. And at Easter, his mother seemed more heavenly, like an angel hovering over them and telling him everything would be fine, because that was God's will.

Knin in the palm of the hand

War was like an escalator in a big department store. When you get on the first step you have to go to the top. You otherwise risk breaking your leg. There was no time for taking a breath or relaxing after even the biggest battles and most glorious victories. As soon as you conquer one peak, you have to start thinking about the next. Initiative is the “law” and without it there is no victory. If you just stay where you are, satisfied with past accomplishments so that your life is easier and more comfortable, then you risk breaking your leg. That’s why an *active defense* is the precondition for victory, its *spiritus movens*. It drives the enemy into the defensive position, imposes its will upon him, and determines his fate. It’s not just a question of military strength and superiority but psychology; it is the psychology of waging war. After difficult and sometimes successful battles, it’s the only way to maintain the troops in a necessary state of tension and battle readiness. The raw realities of war are that euphoria can transform itself in a split second into apathy, and victorious fervor into a loser mentality.

Ante was more than well aware of this. That is why he always repeated to his officers that they must never allow reinforcement troops to return to positions they themselves had taken. “Because if a soldier returns to the same trench he left fifteen days ago, what does this remind him of? The stress, fear, and cold he experienced. A film he thought had played itself out in his mind returns, and that wears on him, destroys the warrior in him and turns him into a living but recalcitrant piece of meat. But if he returns to a whole new position and sees that they have advanced and that the battlefield has been better consolidated, that’s something else entirely. His *elan*, ambition, and battle readiness are

increased. That is why the commander must try every day to provoke the enemy in some way so that he has no peace. Only this gives the soldier strength and ignites within him the victor's mentality.”

After these words, which he repeated over and over like a broken record, he would fall silent, as though extracting the quintessence, and then add: “And just so you know – the order “even if it costs your life, don't retreat from this position” doesn't mean anything. It's this one that is crucial: “even if it costs your life, you have to move farther on.”

This became the law. When Krsticevic, the legendary commander of the 4th Guard Brigade, would leave his position, he was known to say, with the pride and hard-headedness befitting a twenty year old: “Look, here is the position we are leaving you with!”, alluding to the advances and progress he had made with his troops. Then the just as legendary Korade would come, commander of the younger but no less renowned 7th Guard Brigade. Quiet and tough, honorable and proud, as many from his area of Zagorje were known to be, he would roll his eyes and, at the cost of his life, make sure he would advance as much or more as the fiery Krsticevic and his Dalmatian soldiers. Rivalry, which Ante encouraged, was as catching as a smile. But it was not really competition; it was more a friendly show of devotion. Like when people listen to music together and, taken by the melodies and rhythm, begin tapping their feet in unison along with it.

After Operation Winter 1994, it was crucial that the units maintain a high level of activity, especially since conditions were difficult; almost inhuman. The Velebit

mountains were crueler and in a way more severe, but the Dinars were wilder and more treacherous, even when they seemed tame. So Ante decided on an action, *Jump 1*, which was to be purely tactical: to animate his own units. They carried out short attacks – actually jumps from ledge to ledge – in order to gain more advantageous positions in the area of Zelena Brda and Crvene Grede, come closer to enemy refuges around Unista and Cetina, and thwart enemy attacks from the direction of Kijevo-Unista. The action was implemented April 6, 1995. It lasted one day, and 75 square meters of territory were liberated.

Jump 2, which followed almost two months later (June 4-11, 1995) was a much more serious operation, carried out with larger numbers of troops, strong cannon support, logistics, and medical reinforcements. The strategic goal was to gain control of the heights from which the entire Livno plains could be monitored. Ante, who commanded the Croatian forces; that is, the HVO as well, was totally successful and they had for the first time full freedom of maneuverability in this area. By taking over Mali and Veliki Sator, Glamocko Polje and transport routes toward Glamoc-Bosansko Grahovo were also under control. A further 450 square kilometers were liberated and the pre-conditions were established for *Operation Summer 1995: Oluja* and the liberation of the occupied Croatian territories, including Knin, the epicenter of the Serb rebellion.

”The key is on the Dinar mountains”, General Bobetko would say, adding: “whoever wants to control Knin has to first control these fearsome mountains.” He was so convinced of this that he told Ante one day, at a time when the chetniks were still holding

the Dinars and other important mountains: “Here, take a look at this book!” It was the “Knin Operation”, a book that described the battle for Knin in the Second World War. The Partisans had suffered huge losses because they had attacked frontally from the south. Ante mulled over this book, gaining insight into the psychology of the enemy and getting the scent of his defense philosophy. After all, the book had Tito’s *imprimatur* and a generation of his JNA officers had been schooled by it!

“It’s true. Whoever has control of the Dinars, Velebit, Marinovo Brdo and Sator mountains has Knin in the palm of his hand” he would repeat every time it seemed as though blood, sweat, and cold was all they had to show for the six months of fighting on the Dinars and Livno plains, and for Operation Winter 1994, *Jump 1* and *Jump 2*. They had to take all the important mountain peaks in order to taste freedom; that is, to have Knin in the palm of their hand.

A month and a half later, Ante had Knin at his disposal. He was standing on the last Croatian line on the Dinars, about 1,000 meters above sea level. It was a sunny day and the Dinars were as seductive as nymphs. American officers who had just landed in their helicopter were standing next to him. They had been brought by the American Embassy in Zagreb to see a miracle they could never have imagined. From those heights, Knin really was in the palm of the hand and these professional soldiers realized immediately that this was pretty much the end of the story.

But they weren't just amazed by Croatia's strategic cleverness of cutting Knin off on its Bosnian side, but by the fact that, even at this height, they saw a unit of tanks among the forests and bushes. One of which was for these times a very modern M-84. They were almost tempted to touch them to make sure it wasn't just their imagination.

“Getting armor all the way up here and under such conditions...this is really fantastic” one of them said, astounded, and looked around as though searching for the giant crane which must have dropped these immense tanks onto the mountains. After a few seconds, he looked at Ante, who had the expression of a satisfied wolf on his face, and asked: “You held out for seven months under these conditions and broke through this many kilometers of road?” As he spoke, he was turning around and around as though he didn't believe what he was seeing and hearing.

It was Friday, the next to the last day of July. *Operation Summer 1995* had come to a successful end. On July 22, Tudjman and Izetbegovic signed in Split the *Declaration on Common Defense from Serbian Aggression*, which made possible the coordinated operations of the Bosnia-Herzegovinian (BH) Army and the Croatian Forces (HV and HVO) within Bosnia and Herzegovina. In furtherance of this, a joint coordination and operative command centers were established. The BH Army Forces were commanded by General Karavelic, and the Croatian forces by General Gotovina.

The task appeared simple: strike from the north toward Bihac in order to weaken the Serbian offensive on this enclave, which had lasted for weeks, and in which not only

Bosnian Serbs, but rebel Serbs from Croatia and Muslim forces commanded by the mutinous Fikret Abdic were participating. The situation was so critical that the enclave could have fallen at any minute, thus enabling the Serb forces to merge. This would have led to catastrophic and far-reaching consequences not only for Croatians and Muslims in Bosnia and Hercegovina, but also for Croatia itself. But there was one further goal more important to Croatian forces: bring Knin into a position of semi-encirclement.

“It’s most important to us to convince the enemy that the focus of the action is in the north, toward Bihac. He has to believe that our main and only goal is joining with the BH Army 5th corps forces defending the Bihac enclave. That is actually our goal, but the Serbs have to believe it’s our only goal. Our other more important goal, which needs to remain secret, is the attack toward Bosansko Grahovo. We have to do this so that the enemy thinks we’re trying to trick him with this attack, but at the same time, we have succeed in the attack!” The commanders had no response to Ante’s words. Everything was clear to them. They were just waiting for the cannons to start firing, at 5am on the day of the attack.

Prior to this, Ante took pains to simulate everything so that the enemy would be convinced that the attack on the city and all the important mountaintops, including Stara Dinara, Marinovo Brdo, and Prijevoj Derala, was a trick. As a result, resistance in the direction of Glamoc was much fiercer: the chetniks waged an especially tough defense of positions on Golo Brdo and Italian Peak.

It was a kind of roulette; one that had more to do with evaluation and tactics than luck. Ante was aware of the risk involved, but something told him it would bring success. He figured the chetniks would not believe he was crazy enough to initiate such a battle, and that they would therefore not respond effectively at the crucial moment. He was also convinced that the 4th and 7th Guard Brigades were so battle-tested that they operated as two bodies with only one soul. He also believed that if things started to go wrong, Krsticevic and Korade would jump in on time, make the necessary corrections, and pull it off successfully. But you still couldn't exclude the possibility of danger.

He was consciously going against military theory, doing something they would fail him for if this were a military academy examination. As he was thinking about it, he realized he was sweating and that the neck of his shirt was completely wet, his neck cold, his fists clenched, and his body tight, as though warding off an expected blow. Then he relaxed, inhaled his cigarette deeply, and returned in his thoughts to the same situation. But something kept telling him that he should do it, strike simultaneously in two directions. Hit the area of Bosansko Grahovo with the 7th and 4th Guard Brigades and other accompanying units, and on the right, toward Glamoc, with the other Guard Brigades of the HVO and HV. But when everything was put into motion, a critical situation developed at one point, at the height of the attack, when the Croatian forces had to separate in order to create a V-shaped formation.

If the enemy had been able to foresee this, or had reacted more quickly and deployed heavy forces here, they would have been able to wedge themselves in at the apex and cut

off the Croatian attack units from their homeland. Then they, along with the battle itself, would have been lost. But Ante depended here on a little luck and a lot of intuition. And he succeeded.

When his forces came out on Stara Dinara, Marinovo Brdo and the other peaks, the rebel Serbs in Knin could hardly believe what had happened. They hadn't imagined the Croats would take such a difficult course, hold it for so long, and ultimately attack them from behind. And achieve at the same time such a brilliant victory around Glamoc.

“Separating the forces like that isn't practical and isn't to be recommended, but it worked this time” Ante said later, adding: “It had to work!”

The liberation of Bosansko Grahovo and Glamoc was celebrated as a great and momentous victory by the Croatian media, though their liberation was completely insignificant from a military standpoint. But what nobody knew or understood was the importance of the battle to take the Stara Dinara and Marinovo Brdo peaks and the Sator mountains around Vitoroga. War has a logic that the eagles sometimes understand better than people who don't have all the facts. In only five days, more than 1600 square meters of territory was liberated, Bihac was saved, and the pre-conditions were created for the liberation of occupied parts of Bosnia and Hercegovina and Croatia.

Tudjman: How on earth did you manage that?

It was a completely altered world away from the battlefield. People lived quite differently than in 1991, although the country remained in a state of latent war and the rebel Serbs were still terrorizing Croatian cities and villages from time to time. It was as though there were no more war. You could read about it now and then in the news or see it on television, but the real situation and conditions in the battlefield hardly reached the consciousness of the average citizen. Practically the entire nation was waging war four years ago; now it was only the soldiers who were fighting. Croatia lived two lives; they were connected by an umbilical cord but had scarcely anything else in common. Life in Zagreb was determined by jobs and traffic, and on the battlefield by terrain configurations and a certain inner rhythm of war. The difference was that in Zagreb you didn't have to go to work or take the tram unless you wanted to, but on the battlefield you didn't have the luxury to think about what you did or didn't want to do. There you were hostage to events, even when you created them yourself. If a private life even existed, it seemed like just a crack in an immense wall. You could take refuge in one of them and forget once in a while that you didn't just exist for yourself alone. And then either destruction or love happened.

The night *Operation Summer 1995* concluded, Ante got into a jeep around midnight and headed for Zagreb. He knew he had at the most 24-48 hours. He had been in Zagreb that morning at 11am, in the city hall in the upper city. Colonel Dunja Zloic had been waiting for him, along with her witness, Minister Gojko Susak. Dunja was a young and temperamental woman with almond eyes which radiated her essential goodness. She appealed to Ante the first time he saw her. It had been in Zadar, a year ago. They were

both in the Croatian army, both with Mediterranean souls, and Ante had come to terms long ago with his past. “We ought to go out some time for dinner” he had said to Dunja, smiling in a way that cloaked the seriousness of his intentions. After one week, the situation on the battlefield was such that it allowed him to leave for a few hours to go to dinner with her and thus seal his fate.

He was now standing in front of the city hall with his best man and old friend, General Ante Roso. It was a short wedding, like a bolt of lightning. Afterwards the four of them went to lunch at the Hotel Intercontinental, but didn’t stay long. “We have to hurry a little, we have a helicopter waiting for us” Susak said to Ante, adding: “we’re going to Pula, and then to see the President on Brijuni. He heard you are getting married. He wondered how you had managed. He literally said: How on earth did he manage that? And I told him you knew you only had time on Saturday, so you hurried to finish the operation by Friday night. Then he laughed and said to tell you to come see him.”

Dunja and Ante spent that evening with Tudjman, who was in a very good mood due to the success of *Operation Summer 1995*. He was relaxed and talkative, and all the people there were in great spirits. When he went to bed, Ante thought about all who had been present and how they had laughed too loud and too hard at the President’s every word. That bothered him, but he just shook his head and told himself: “What are you going to do. That’s just the way things are.” The next morning he was back in the helicopter. He was returning to his command post in Bosnia to prepare for the next operation: *Oluja!*

In contrast to the Velebit mountains, the Dinars were covered with thick forests on the southern side. Centuries-old trees towered toward the peaks but never quite reached them. The peaks were as bare as a stony desert. The *bura* blew over them often, sometimes more than 100 kilometers an hour. When that happens, it knocks you off your feet. Only wolves and tough, sparse mountain grass can survive. That's how it is on Troglav, the highest peak. Gray and steep on the northwest side, as though it has just sprouted from the earth. Only Vjestic Gori was different.

Completely overgrown with heavy woods all the way to its peak, and protected from the worst winds, it looked as though it was growing right up into the sky. It seemed as though the Dinars had fashioned its little oasis there. And now after the stress of being in the helicopter for so long, he felt somehow joyous. The view of this huge mountain that he loved, admired, and respected calmed him. He was attracted by the merging of the wild and the tame. In the winter, when the snow was waist deep, it seemed as though you were passing through an endless white tunnel, surrounded on both sides by branches heavy with snow. And then, when the sun would shine, the tunnels would glitter like fireflies or small diamonds. This mixture of almost divine beauty and treacherous rawness was nowhere more evident than on Vjestic Gori.

There was a state of the art surgical center set up here, with almost all logistics, from ammunition to food. The trees were so tall and thick that it seemed as though the slightest breeze could not have penetrated, so that the coldness in this outpost was somehow less harsh.

Here he always felt relaxed and somehow protected; the others felt the same way. But the Dinars would sometimes surprise you, seduce you with a sense of security and then, before you realized it, you were a goner.

He gazed at the mountains blazing from the October sun as he approached Rujani, a Bosnian village where his command site was located. He recalled talking to an American captain not long ago on the Dinars about hunting, and had told him: “If you meet a wolf, don’t shoot him. He is a noble animal. He’s the closest to us soldiers. He knows how to exist alone, but when he is in a pack, there is a hierarchy.” Then he inhaled as though trying to avoid being sentimental, adding: “Here we are, we’re here already!”

That’s it! All at the same time!

“So that, gentlemen, is the political situation” Tudjman said, concluding his short expose, and then added: “Europe and America are incapable under the present circumstances of resolving the situation in Bosnia or in Croatia. Look what the Serbs are doing! We have done everything we can to resolve the problem peacefully, but now enough is enough. They will not give up Bihac, and that directly endangers our national interests. And the West isn’t going to do anything; they just stood by watching as Srebrenica fell and massacres were committed by General Mladic. We can no longer tolerate occupation and degradation. Now is the moment, because the West has nowhere to go, and we have the strength and the intelligence to resolve our situation ourselves. And help them at the

same time. Besides, there is no other solution.” Tadjman said all this in a self-confident and calm manner. And then he looked over at the Head of the Main Headquarters of the Croatian Army and said: “Now let’s take a look at those plans!”

The top commanders, Ministers of Foreign and Domestic Affairs, Minister of Defense, and heads of the intelligence services were all sitting at a large, oval table in a hall on Brijuni. General Gotovina was there, as commander of the Croatian forces, accompanied by two officers, one of whom was from the HVO. To his right stood a large blackboard placed where everyone could see it. General Cervenko, who had replaced Bobetko as the Head of the Croatian military, gave the sign for a working map to be hung upon the blackboard. Then in broad strokes he explained the basic idea, which was that the liberation of the occupied territories be implemented in two phases. In the first, they would attack the so-called *north sector* with full force and then, depending on how things developed, the operation would expand to the *south sector*. At the end, they would attack Knin.

Tudjman listened carefully, like a mole preparing to pounce upon its prey, and then looked at the map and the directions of attack. Minister Susak also took a look at everything, but his reaction was hard to read. He finally said “aha” and then decisively: “Give me a plan for the *south sector*.”

There was still enough room on the blackboard for Ante to be able to hang up his working map underneath the one for the *north sector*. So he drew in lines for the main

balance of forces, especially emphasizing the strategic superiority gained by *Operation Summer 1995*. “So this is the main direction of activity. The Serbs will have an open corridor toward Bosansko Petrovo to retreat with their forces. That way we’ll avoid unnecessary casualties” he said at the end, and then looked at the commander, who continued studying the map for another 20-30 seconds in deep concentration, as though searching for a lost and precious object.

“That’s it!! All at the same time!” Tudjman said, failing to completely contain his enthusiasm. It was clear that the former Tito general had grasped Ante’s idea of hitting Knin, the most incorrigible nest of the Serbian para-state and its rebels, full force on the first day of the operation. And that it was the most intelligent step, both militarily and politically.

“So that’s that, and now tell me about their forces, where they are deployed here in Croatia and in Bosnia,” he continued, and when he had been told, he asked: “How long do you need for the entire liberation operation?” The generals answered: “Eight days”, and then he exploded like a cannon: “No, four is enough! You can do this in four days, you’ll see! And then added immediately: “That’s an order!”

Twenty four hours later, a stocky man jumped out of a jeep in front of the command post in Rujani. He was carrying a yellow, sealed envelope that he had brought from Zagreb. As soon as Ante took it from him, he knew what was in it: the order to begin the operation! He was not a bit surprised; in fact, he had suspected as much. It could have

come a day or two later, but he was sure that D Day had arrived. After all, everything was ready for action, and the waiting was the hardest part. It was always like that before a battle. The worst were the final moments, especially between the time orders were given and the beginning of the battle. That's the way it was now. He had received the order on August 3rd in the morning, and had been told in brief military language that they should begin on the 4th, a day later.

That evening at the regular briefing, he informed his commanders that the operation was beginning. This meeting did not last long: short questions and just as short answers. He spent a little more time checking the artillery and deployment forces, as they would be the first to move out and attack.

The day was clear, typical for August, and Ante was certain it would be the same the next day at dawn. So there would be no problems with the artillery. But in spite of the optimism which seemed to be called for in this situation, he could not completely free himself from nerves. It was always like this before a battle: "I just wish it would begin" he would tell himself a hundred times. These moments lasted forever, he couldn't sleep, kept waking up, and all sorts of thoughts were swimming through his head: "Is this OK? Did we do this the way we were supposed to? Will everything be all right?" And then at 3am, he was on his feet checking communications. And finally asked every one of his commanders: "Ready?" and when he had heard the short answer: "Ready!", he gave the command: "Move out!" Only then did his nerves disappear. He was now a warrior thinking of nothing but the task he had to perform.

Oluja in the Knin valley

Night transformed itself quietly into day. If it weren't for the roar of the cannons, the scene would have been idyllic. It was less than 7-10 kilometers from the last points of the Dinars and Marinovo Brdo to Knin, so the city looked like some white sprud in the valley interspersed with dappled pastures and surrounded by almost blue mountains. The barely noticeable mist hanging over this panorama covered everything in a languorous veil: it seemed as though the entire valley were calmly and peacefully slumbering, oblivious to the thundering from the deceptively clear skies. But every time a grenade would explode, there would be curses issuing from the Serb trenches, in addition to the hope that the "Ustashis would finally make their move!"

The 7th and 4th Guard Brigades were tense and as concentrated as sprinters waiting for the beginning shot to be fired. They had only one task: to come down from the Dinars and Marinovo Brdo to the polygon "Red Earth" from one direction, and Strmice from the other side; in other words, to charge in and cut off the chetnik line of defense. Assisting in the defense of the right flank were HVO units, so Korade and Krsticevic had nothing to think about but the goal before them. Because they were able to relax and feel secure, unburdened with what was happening behind them, they performed the task quickly, precisely, and in a deadly manner. The 4th and the 7th moved together like an avalanche. They charged forward in the shape of a binary unit: while one took over the territory, the other protected the flanks and vice versa.

The battle was short, but bloody, because the chetniks bitterly defended their first and at the same time last line of defense, knowing that if it fell, Knin could not be saved.

During these moments, the entire Knin valley was transformed into a cloud of gunpowder without beginning or end, mixed with the brightness of the breaking dawn and the deafening pounding of the heavy weaponry. At some points, resistance was so fierce that the line could only be penetrated by hand to hand combat. The Croatian warriors fought like lions attacking a buffalo, unstoppable, fearlessly, as though driven by some inner force which had turned them into one soul, one will. They died the same way: with a barely audible cry on their lips. As though only the body remained from this chaos of blood and freedom.

By 11am, the 4th and 7th Guard Brigades had destroyed the chetnik defense and stood before Knin. In only six hours! But only the 7th Guard Brigade went into Knin; the 4th went around it, almost close enough to touch it. Ante had ordered this consciously and with a heavy heart. The 4th Guard Brigade had played a crucial and valuable role in the operation. He knew how badly the boys wanted to go into Knin, but he knew that almost every soldier in this Brigade had had family members killed by the chetniks, houses burned, property destroyed. Though they were consummate fighters and professionals, he didn't dare risk anything at this point. He would rather endure the rage of his Dalmatians rather than take the risk of someone doing something which would later cast a shadow on the historical battle and victory. But he did order the flags of both brigades to be raised by both Korade and Krsticevic later the same day on top of the Knin fortress.

Thus, on the first day of *Oluja*, the 4th and 7th Guard Brigade flags were flying on the fortress along with the national flag.

Ten hours before the Croatian army entered Knin, the artillery had performed its indispensable task. All night long it had hit targets around the city in order to psychologically exhaust the enemy. In the sights were chetnik armored forces, rocket systems, artillery, and the units themselves in their battle positions. At the same time, members of UNCRO and other members of the international community, and Serbian civilians who unlike the majority of the others had not left the city, took refuge in cellars and shelters in the *Southern Camp* – the former barracks of the JNA – which was located in Knin.

Whenever a grenade would fall near the city, there would first be a regular explosion and then the detonation would spread through the valley like a tortured wail, creating the impression that several and not just one grenade had fallen, that the earth itself was shattering apart from the intensity of the attack. A British intelligence officer who was posing there as an UNCRO spokesman and was crouching along with the others in the *Southern Camp* would count each time the actual and imagined hits. “You guys, the Croatians have completely leveled this city! Do you hear how horrible that is? They could still hit us!” he said in a very upset tone, looking left and right as though seeking confirmation of his words.

When the battle for Knin was over and when the British officer climbed out later with the others from his shelter, he couldn't believe his eyes. The city was whole, and had not

been significantly damaged. Traces of cannon hits could be seen only on the military warehouses, where the cannon units had been located, and where chetnik motorized forces were captured. “Wait a minute, this isn’t possible...” he said in disbelief. Later he nonetheless testified that Knin had been hit too excessively by Croatian artillery. That same afternoon, when the British officer was regarding the world around him with disbelief, Ante was making a quick trip to Knin from Rujani. Just to see the city, to experience the realization of the dream. He couldn’t stay there because they had not completed all preparations for moving the command posts and the battle was still far from over.

Things got stuck in the other line of attack from the direction of the Velebit mountains, so he decided on dropping troops into the Obrovac area by helicopter. The well-trained First Guard Brigade, which had been held in reserve, was deployed to this area as soon as the situation on the entire *South Sector* – from the Zadar hinterlands through Sibenik and around Sinj – had been consolidated. Ante felt as each hour went by that his orchestra was playing in greater harmony, that all he had to do was continue with the same rhythm and tact, keep driving the enemy and clean the terrain all the way to Dvor na Uni, which was his military zone of responsibility.

On the morning of August 5th, he was again in Knin. He had a meeting with the UNCRO commanders, people he knew well from before and with whom he had to now discuss the most effective way to help the civilians that had remained in the city, and set up a security system and everything else the wartime situation required. While he was waiting

for the meeting on the Knin fortress, he looked around him, at all the territory that had been liberated. He felt filled with pride, but also with an inexplicable emptiness. He had dreamt of this moment so often that it now seemed pale in comparison, almost everyday, unexceptional. Had it all happened too fast, did his dreams just use him up? He had no answer, but just did not feel the excitement that would have been appropriate to these dreams and wishes. Perhaps because he was still in the midst of battle, concentrated on the job he still had to do. Only later did he become aware of the historical dimension of those August days.

When the gentlemen from UNCRO arrived around 9:30am, Ante was there to greet them; clean-shaven, spit-shined, and brown from the sun, just like in the days of his youth. He was dressed in impeccable military uniform, and had the kind of suppressed smile on his face which befitted a victor who was not arrogant, but aware that from now on, new rules applied. “Gentlemen, I am happy to be able to greet you here in Knin. This is nothing new to you, because you’ve been here for a long time, but I am especially pleased to be here. I hope you can understand that...”, he said, showing his old acquaintances into the room where the working meeting would be held.

Immediately thereafter, he had a regular briefing in the same room with his commanders. After considering questions relating to the further course of the operation, Ante said in a special tone of voice: “I want you all to be wide awake, just, and firm. Not just because those are the rules of war, but for the security of our own soldiers. The army has won, people are euphoric, but also emotionally drained. They might start to relax too soon,

and then accidents could happen. There are a lot of armed, chetnik groups in the area, and they are still dangerous. So your orders have to be firm and clear and your discipline impeccable. The battle isn't over yet, the enemy is regrouping in Bosnia, preparing for a counterattack.”

Then he took a few drags of his cigarette, got up from the table, and continued: “You have to protect your territory; there will be no destruction or fires, and you have to behave humanely towards all civilians, no matter who they are. Because you are a victorious army! And that's the way victors behave! If you can't control how justice is dispensed you're going to get hurt in the end.” Then he fell silent for a moment, and continued in a quiet voice: “Why do you think I asked priests whenever it was possible, and once even the bishop, to talk to you, to say a few words? Because I wanted you to realize that God had not created you to be slaves that submit to others, but to be free people fighting for their families and their homeland. That is God's command, but there are also rules you have to respect, God's rules! That means that every commander has to make sure that not even the lowest-ranking soldier dirties his hands, that he does not lose his dignity. When a prisoner raises his hands in the air, regardless of what you think about him, no matter how mad you are at him, you do not degrade him, you treat him as a human being, and protect his wife and children, because that is how a great warrior and true victor behaves! Nobody needs to know about it, and you don't need to pat yourself on the back for it. It's enough that you know how you behaved. Because that's what makes you great, inside and out.”

Nobody has foot soldiers like these!

Two days after the 7th Guard Brigade had entered Knin, President Tudjman arrived in “Zvonimir’s city”. In evidence were streets and houses which showed no signs of the battle that had swept through. The weather was “majestic”: crystal clear and sunny. The whole country was euphoric, and Tudjman kissed the flag on the Knin fortress, and raised both hands, fists clenched, in the air, thus expressing what every Croatian soul felt at that moment. When he greeted Ante, he shook his hand firmly; it seemed as though he wanted to say so much all at once, but only succeeded in blurting out: “We did it, we won!” Ante felt all the emotion, joy, and pride which were sublimated in this one short sentence. He just smiled and nodded his head in agreement to his commander-in-chief. A few hours later he was in the midst of battle again. The enemy had been routed but could still not be underestimated. And he never did.

He knew that the JNA was sluggish, bureaucratized, and held back by outdated military doctrine, but he still did not underestimate its officers. These people joined the military because the profession interested them. And therefore they applied themselves to it. The officers, or at least the majority, studied, perfected their skills, and became acquainted with the doctrines of other armies. They had mastered their subject and this could not be ignored. Vanity and arrogance in war made the worst allies. As he had said many times, every commander is only as capable as the officers he has under him. “You must surround yourself with capable people, because you can’t know everything: artillery, air and naval forces...” He had the good fortune to have worked with people who had

learned their trade in the JNA and who had later, as high-ranking and very talented officers, crossed over into the Croatian army. They knew the psychology of the opponent extremely well, because they knew personally many of the enemy commanders and also the JNA's way of thinking. This was a major advantage. Only in this way could he know how the opponent would react, how he would defend himself, and what were his weak and strong points.

“So that's our assignment. This is what we have to do. This is what I think and this is my plan. What do you think about it?” Ante would ask Domazet, giving him the map with the drawn-in lines of attack. Then he would discuss every detail with him, placing special emphasis on strategic-intelligence components, as Domazet was an expert on this. Then he would call Ademi and ask him the same questions, but with an emphasis on troop formations and artillery, and then with Rakic, who was an expert on the operative level, or Đanko, or Engineer Jericevic..

He listened to them all carefully, asking questions and follow-ups, and from their ideas and suggestions he would decide not only what he had to do or how much time he had for an operation, but also how the opponent was likely to react: how he would set his defense, place his reserve forces, and eventually implement a counter-offensive. Of course intelligence data played a significant role, but without the *psychoanalysis* of the opponent he got from his own officers, it would have been much more difficult to form a mosaic of future operations.

“Only after you have this and let it all percolate awhile can you know who you’re dealing with, who is waiting on the other side, where he’s strong, what his specialty is, where and how you can hit him on the flanks or from behind. And how to surprise him. See, this is the philosophy behind the creation of operations plans!” he said, adding that this still wasn’t all. “You also have to know your own forces. If you want to hit the enemy in the head and penetrate his lines at the most critical points, then you know you have to send Dalmatians – the 4th Guard Brigade. Or Hercegovinians, the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd Guard Brigades of the HVO. They are southerners, stubborn, emotional, explosive, unstoppable. They shatter everything in their path, like a bomb. There’s nobody who can equal them for energy, will, and ferocious courage.

But as soon as they perform this task, you have to replace them immediately, because their emotional charge disperses as quickly as it appears. If you don’t, they’ll say “That’s it. We did our part. Now it’s someone else’s turn.” Then you send in the 7th Guard Brigade, the boys from Zagorje, Podravac, Medimurac. They are more stable, their emotions oscillate a lot less, and they don’t use themselves up all of a sudden. They are more pedantic and plodding. If they lose a man, they deal with it differently. They don’t fall into a *collective crisis* like the southerners.

And if you send Slavonians (3rd and 5th Brigades) into action, then you have to know that they are excellent fighters but they need a little time to get warmed up. They are like lions who need the proper conditions and temperature to activate themselves, but when

they charge, no force on earth can stop them. That's how they are, they go all the way and nobody can prevent them from reaching their goal.”

Then Ante would mention the tough and resistant Lika fighters who were all somehow related to each other (9th Guard Brigade), and as though he had just recalled something, would continue: “So that's why our foot soldiers are the best in the world. I've fought everywhere, gotten to know a lot of different armies, but nobody has soldiers like the Croatians. Why? Because of this difference in temperament and mentality. Just like we are used to all kinds of climates and terrain: hurricane force winds, snowstorms, heavy rain, and thick mud; hellish heat and rock. Neither America, nor Germany, nor France have all that. Nobody has that explosiveness, that attack force, the pedantry, the endurance, hardness and resistance, all that potential. Only Croatia has it! And this war proved it.

So you can't treat behave with southerners the way you do with the ones from Zagorje; otherwise you'll have 3,000 guns and not a single soldier. On the other hand, when the southerner realizes the importance of something, that something crucial is involved, then you have him 100%. Then he's like the ultimate explosive charge. All these skills and differences augment each other and create an ensemble Croatian infantry, unified and unsurpassed. What you have is the consummate foot soldier. The Croatian footsoldier.”

“But we have something nobody else has except Israel. Commanders who have earned their stripes in war, as victors. Who were literally created. Who analyzed what didn't

work in those first years and then studied and changed things to prepare for the final battles and ultimate victory. That is the experience of the War of the Homeland, that's the human capital we have. The miracle of the Croatian army, which started from scratch, but became in five years the strongest, most capable and professional army in this area.”

23 kilometers from Banja Luka

Exactly four days after the operation began, the Croatian army came out on the Bosnia-Herzegovina border. *Oluja* had been concluded successfully, and northern Dalmatia had been liberated. Nothing remained of the Knin para-state. Only a wave of refugees. Serb civilians together with the defeated Krajina para-military were on the move toward Dvor na Uni and Drvar. This exodus began just as *Oluja* commenced, as a kind of indirect recognition of *collective guilt*, or at least responsibility, for all the years of rebellion and crime. Those who didn't leave on their own were driven to go by Martić and his men. The world was concerned about the humanitarian catastrophe, so the chetnik leadership was gloating, but Milošević was not impressed. He was waiting for his chance. Karadžić was threatening fresh destruction and new attacks. Because *Oluja* had destroyed his already initiated plan of physically uniting territories he controlled with *Krajina* in Croatia. Martić's routed units thus joined Mladić's forces immediately, preparing for a counterattack to show that nothing was over yet, that the nation wasn't lost or the army annihilated.

The Croatian forces under Ante's command responded with a new operation: *Maestral*. Exactly a month after *Oluja* they advanced toward Prijedor and Sanski Most (together with the BH Army forces' 5th and 7th Corps), and opened up a battlefield 100 kilometers long in the direction of Sipovo, Jajce, and Drvar. It was one of their most difficult battles, which had lasted a week and in which the Serbs had fought fiercely but been ultimately defeated.

Because of the difficult terrain and size of the area, the operation was conducted in three phases, transferring the focus of the attack from one to another direction. The main strike forces were the 4th and 7th Guard Brigades, HVO Guard Brigades, the 1st Guard Brigade, and the 81st Guard Brigade. The territory they liberated comprised 3500 square kilometers, plus the cities of Jajce, Drvar, and Sipovo. The versatility of the Croatian forces was amazing, and as a result the Americans, though they have never publicly admitted it, decided they had found an ally they could use to pressure Belgrade and the Bosnian Serbs. So they quietly and coldly observed the moves of this "powerful military machinery." But the *Maestral* was not able to finally eradicate Karadzic and Mladic or enable Holbrooke to bend Milosevic to his will in Belgrade.

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On October 15, a new operation began: *Southern Strike*. Croatian forces hit the last defense line at Banja Luka: Mrkonjic Grad-Hydrocenter Jajce 3 (Bocac)-Manjaca mountains and the military polygon of the same name. The battle began under adverse

weather conditions and the cannon and rocket attacks had to be postponed, but it was ultimately successful, and in just a few days Ante and his forces were only 23 kilometers from Banja Luka. The Serbs had been completely routed, but still presented a danger. Their artillery continued to function well, and the terrain enabled them to make surprise attacks in small groups. In one such attack near Mrkonjic Grad, the legendary commander of the 4th Guard Brigade, Andrija Matijas-“Spider”, lost his life. Like Gavran, he had been hit by heavy machine gun fire.

When Ante looked down on Banja Luka from Mala Manjaca, he had the same feeling he’d had when he’d looked down on Knin from the Dinars. But this time he went no further. He was not allowed to. An order had come from Zagreb to stop the operation immediately, collect his forces, and report posthaste to the Ministry of Defense. Minister Susak was waiting for him there, along with American Defense Minister Perry and the head of the American Allied Forces. As soon as they took a look at the map, it was clear to everyone that they had a clear path to Banja Luka, that almost the entire energy system of the Bosnian Serbs was in their hands, and that they were facing total defeat.

But the situation got complicated. Civilians had begun to flee from Banja Luka, and the new wave of refugees grew to a column 75 kilometers long. There was a fear that a total rout of the Bosnian Serbs could lead to Muslim acts of revenge upon the civilians.

Tudjman did not want to risk that, so he told Ante to stop. Besides, Washington had gotten a signal from Holbrooke that Milosevic, under pressure from the unfolding events in Banja Luka, was close to agreeing to peace negotiations. The hopeless situation in

which Karadzic and Mladic found themselves suited Milosevic, but he did not want their total defeat. Otherwise he would be unable to play the role of “savior of his nation.”

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“You know, I highly respect your armed forces. I was even a great admirer of your Lieutenant General Gotovina in his operations a few years ago”, NATO Commander General Clark said when he visited Zagreb and Susak’s successor, Hebrang, in 1998. With this he tacitly acknowledged that the U.S. peace initiatives and the Dayton Agreement (signed November 22, 1995) were only able to occur after Croatia had successfully changed the strategic relations on the territory of former Yugoslavia. After all, in the operations Ante led, from *Winter 1994* to the *Southern Strike*, territory the size of 10,000 square kilometers had been liberated! And 136 Croatian soldiers had fallen, 664 were wounded, and three were missing in action.

And the Serbs could not be characterized as unworthy opponents or unorganized mobs. “Of course there were chetnik hordes, but also true soldiers and excellent fighters. People who sincerely believed in the idea of Greater Serbia, and fought with those ideals in their heart” Ante would say, continuing: “I never looked upon them with hatred, but as opponents we had to beat or be beaten by. Because that was it: to be or not to be. I am not talking here about the hordes of murderers, but about the soldiers who were just a step away from destruction yet fought on to the bitter end. Those people were true warriors, if you exclude what they were fighting for, and prepared to give their lives. I

respected that as a soldier and I still respect it today. I saw many who were forced to surrender but succeeded in maintaining their dignity and honor as soldiers. To defeat soldiers like these meant having a true opponent and worthy enemy.”

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What now?

The general felt strange somehow that morning in March. Like he needed air. He got up from the table, left his cigarette in the ashtray, and went over to the window, not opening it but just looking out. He remained there several moments and then gazed up at the sky, as though in conversation with someone, barely moving his lips. Then he looked down, exhaled deeply, and returned to the table. He took a drag of the almost extinguished cigarette, took out a piece of paper, and wrote a short letter to Minister Susak. Blunt, concise, and official, requesting to be released from active military service so that he could return to civilian life.

The war was over, demobilization had been completed, and he was in Knin at the command post of the 3rd battalion. He was filled of pride and satisfaction at all the successful battles and the liberated territories, but still felt empty somehow. In fact, he felt as though he were no longer attracted to military life, because “what more could

possibly happen? I've been in boots all my life, since I was 17, I have achieved everything a soldier could dream of and now it's time to organize my private life. I've barely even had one these past years!" he repeated to himself. Then he recalled his first steps in the Foreign Legion, all those later dreams and adventures, as though trying to persuade someone of something: "Were there greater adventures than those? To become a general and a commander in a victorious army? Do something for my nation?" But whenever he would look around, he would be confronted with a table, an office, and a window, and would feel burdened down. Like an actor in the theater who has said all his lines, but remains on the stage, even though the curtains have fallen and the public has left.

Two days later he was in Zagreb. Susak had called him in for a meeting. When he entered the Minister's large office, he was already sitting in a chair in front of his writing table. "Sit down" he said, and then asked him coldly: "What's happening with you? What do you mean by this letter?" Calmly and almost casually Ante answered that military life no longer appealed to him, that this part of his life was over and that he hoped the Minister would understand. Susak listened closely to him, as though he were not really accepting what he was hearing and was trying to uncover some hidden motive. When he failed, he said in his typical blunt manner: "What happened, did you fall on your head?"

He observed Ante for a few more minutes and then tried to convince him to look at things differently. Because now the army had to be reconfigured from a wartime to a peacetime

army “ and you are indispensable here.” Ante answered that he understood, but that there were many young and capable people with extensive wartime experience who were able to create such an army. “As far as I’m concerned, I really want to leave. I’ve been a soldier for almost 25 years!”

“OK, I don’t want to lecture you here. Go on vacation somewhere for a week”, Susak answered angrily, and then with a barely noticeable smile, he added: “By the way, you have a right to it. You didn’t use the seven days you had coming when you got married. When you come back, call me and we’ll talk about it.”

Ante left the Ministry feeling like a bird who had been freed from its cage. “And now I’m going straight home, to the sea.” He muttered and took a barely perceptible skip.

But Susak didn’t try to that hard to keep him to the agreement to talk, so President Tudjman asked them to come to his office four days later. When they entered, Tudjman was grimacing in his typical manner. He had barely told them to “sit down” before he turned to Ante and said: “Do you know how old I am? I could be your father, maybe even your grandfather. And I work 16 hours a day. Saturday and Sunday, and, as you see, even today!”

A little red in the face, he paused for a moment before continuing: “And you say the war is over, you have nothing to do, you’re bored! What about the Podunavlje area? The building up of the armed forces? They are the guarantors of our national security. And

that's why all of you who have been victors in the war and have all this experience are going to participate in this. And you'll be where I put you. You'll be the Chief Inspector of the Croatian Army!" Tudjman said this firmly and unambiguously, fixing his eye on Ante as though trying to hypnotize him. Ante didn't know what to say; it seemed as though no arguments could possibly succeed with the President. He felt stupid and in a way helpless. He finally nodded his head, giving the sign that he had acceded. And thus returned to the world he had never really left.

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A year and a half later a son was born to him. Dunja named him Ante, which was somehow in line with family tradition, as was the fact that he was already riding a horse at the age of two.*

*Though it doesn't really fit into this story, what has occurred in the meantime fits into the biography; namely, on September 29, 2000, President Mesic removed General Gotovina from his post as Chief Inspector of the Croatian Army. He was "retired" together with six other high-ranking officers who had written an open letter to the Croatian public in which they defended the values of the War of the Homeland.

