

Personal Statement No. 71/00393 Strahinja Živak¹

I was born on the 19th of August 1932 in the village of Brđani near Konjic. My mother's name was Bosiljka; maiden name Zelenović and my father was Đorđe. In 1956 I married Malina, maiden name Šaran. We spent 36 years together and got sons Slobodan, born in 1957 and Velimir, born in 1961. My family has lived in this area for centuries. I experienced World War 2 when I was nine. I witnessed Serbs' suffering, even casualties of my own family/my uncles Uroš and Anđelko were killed by the Muslims and Croats on the river Laša, by hitting their heads with a sledgehammer and after that the river carried them away. It happened in the spring 1941. Next spring, on the 19th of May 1942 I lost my father. The Muslims killed him before my own eyes, butchering him with knives.

My mother Bosiljka became a widow at the age of 28 and with 5 children: I, Anđa, Sofija, Zdravko and Đorđe, who was born 3 days after my father's death and that is why he was named after the father. My brother Zdravko died from typhus in 1943 and 4 of us survived and live today in 3 states: the Republic of Srpska, Montenegro and Serbia. I am glad that even during this war we all stayed in our countries with Serbian people and no one ever thought about escaping to foreign countries. My childhood and youth were very hard. I could not attend the school regularly and I got employed at the age of 16 as the oldest child in the family to help the rest of my family.

Along with work, I had to go to school and I completed primary school, secondary school, College of telecommunications and then Faculty of Traffic, with a major in mail and telecommunications.

It was a big effort all together. I obtained important positions within the mail and telecommunications system and in 1989 I got retired as the Head of Inspection Department of the PTT Sarajevo.

I returned to my home village Brđani, to my farm, to live there for the rest of my life, finding that I earned it, worn out through the work and politics.

On 17th of April 1992, this was ominous day for my further destiny and start of Golgotha that I had to survive. My cousin Božo wounded me accidentally while cleaning a hunting weapon, wounding my both legs and breaking a bone in my right leg. I was transported urgently from the village of Brđani to the town of Konjic. After receiving first aid, I was transported to Sarajevo traumatology clinic. They examined the gunshot wounds on my legs and I stayed there for treatment. The war already begun and the members of the „Green Berets“ entered the hospital rooms with intention to guard it, as

¹ Bojić, D. (Ed.) (1996). Stradanje Srba u Sarajevu: knjiga dokumenata [Suffering of the Serbs in Sarajevo: document book]. Second amended and expanded edition. Belgrade: Komeserijat za izbeglice SR Srbije, pages from 150 to 161.

well as to monitor the patients. I noticed that they had different approach while treating my injuries. After the doctor's morning rounds and prescribing therapy in the patient records that we had on our hospital beds, I did not receive the prescribed therapy, dressing and medicaments. I asked the nurses to give it to me, in fact I asked them why they skipped me when dressing the wounds, and I did not get the answer. One of the nurses, a Muslim, asked me about my nationality, because my surname was not quite clear to her. I answered: "Does it matter?" and I told her that I was an Orthodox Serb. I noticed that all middle medical staff were Muslims. Taking into consideration my serious wounds and pain and lying amongst only Muslim patients and wounded individuals, listening them talking that all Serbs had to be killed and expelled, I had courage to address doctors Vuković and Vranić, the Serbs, who were the heads of traumatology department, the director and deputy, as well as professors at the Faculty of Medicine.

I asked them to have my wounds dressed and to give me my prescribed therapy. They intervened and in that case I was dressed and got the cure. The truth is that it was not enough for successful healing of the wounds, because they were coming to morning rounds every 3 to 4 days, and I was practically without any therapy in the meantime. **The Muslim doctors Dizdar and Kulenović dresses the Muslim patients and wounded persons, besides the nurses doing it. I asked them in person to dress me too that day, but they did not do it, telling that it was duty of the nursing staff and that they did it voluntarily to their wounded and sick individuals.** I asked myself then, although I was not a medical expert, whether the Hippocratic Oath was forgotten by the Muslim medical staff in Koševo Hospital. I answered myself that it was forgotten. I as a Serb, civilian wounded person – a patient, was receiving different treatment only because being of Orthodox Christian religion and Serbian nation.

After such a treatment the wounds got infected and doctor Dizdar (Muslim) transferred me to another, so called septic department. Even there I was not treated same way as their sick and wounded. On 29th of May 1992, in order to empty space for their patients and wounded, they transferred me with the infected wounds, on crutches to another department (building next to the Traumatology) of Internal Medicine. I had to go every third day to my "basic" hospital for dressing and examination.

Sometimes, I would be dressed and examined and mostly would not, depending on who of the doctors and other staff was on duty. One day, when I was visiting other department, they brought to my room an operated patient, escorted by the Muslim police. Others pointed at the patient, telling he was a „Chetnik“, and his name was **Pjevac Pero**. After coming from dressing from the Internal Medicine clinic, I visited the patients in the room, I used to be with, but Pero was not there anymore. I asked the patients and nurses if they knew where Pero was and they answered they did not know. Pero was taken from the hospital bed, killed and buried at the "Lav" cemetery, which

is next to the hospital. I found it out listening to the conversation of the police officers, who were securing Internal Medicine clinic. Sitting on the bench in front of hospital I heard the conversation: He will have same destiny as Pjevac Pero, eaten already by worms in "Lav". **I also heard in my room their wounded patients Nasim Ugljanin and Sejo Bea talking that the Serb wounded and sick patients had been killed in the morgue and taken to the "Lav" cemetery.** I was very sad hearing that, as well as the stories and a new song about killing Serbs and bars of dead bodies in the river of Miljacka, which they gladly listened on the radio.

I was constantly questioned by the police officers and doctors about the way I got wounded, where I lived, what I did and other details. I had a feeling that something bad was going to happen; no matter that I was immobile and sick. Then they started making lists of Serb nationality patients, putting their names on the doors of their rooms. On the 4th of July 1992, after 80 days of hospitalization, three armed police officers entered my room asking: "Who is Živak?" I was lying and sat on the bed and introduced myself. They dragged me roughly from the bed and told me to go with them. I asked them: Why are you taking me and do you have an order to take me away. I am a sick man, immobile and cannot go anywhere. I was hit a few times with button. I tried to take crutches and hygiene kit and some medications, which had been brought to me by a cousin. They did not allow me to take anything, even the crutches, telling me I would not need it and I would not walk too far. Seeing that I could not get out without crutches, they gave them to me and got me out of the hospital. A black car waited for me. They pushed me into the car, tossed the crutches back and handcuffed me. They started beating me with buttons and slapped me cursing my Serb family and a mother. The car drove off and the driver saved me from further battery, because I disturbed him driving with avoiding their punches. They told driver to drive to the "Lav" cemetery. "We are going to kill him there". That moment reminded me on the killing of Pero Pjevac. Since the car passed the cemetery, the police officers said to take me to the river of Miljacka where they had killed other Serbs. „It is cheaper not to dig the grave for every garbage“ Cell 78 is better than "Lav" and Miljacka. They took me into a prison, a large room, and there were about ten police officers, armed with Hecklers, pistols and daggers.

A man in plain clothes, with short beard, was sitting at the table and they called him "investigator". Bringing me into the room, they introduced me: "That is the Chetnik , member of SDS from Konjic" Another man in uniform, whom they called the warden, entered the room. He spoke to me: You have chance to stay alive or to be shot. It depends on you and if you tell us the truth". I said I was not afraid of the truth and that I did not commit any crime and that I was a wounded civilian, a sick person, which had nothing to do with the war that broke out. They searched me to the skin, although I had only the upper part of pyjamas, short pants and a sock on my left foot. The other leg was all in plaster cast all the way to the foot, with a hole in the place of the wound and a cover, also made of plaster, on it.

They found nothing, except a small piece of paper with a few telephone numbers of my friends in Sarajevo, who I tried to contact and inform that I was in the hospital, in a pocket of pyjamas. Unfortunately, there was also my press card of the “Večernje Novosti” newspapers from Belgrade. I used to be their correspondent from Konjic and later from Sarajevo. They beat me again with the buttons. “So, he was a Serbian journalist, you can see whom we have here.” The “investigator” ordered them to stop beating me: “You see that he is sick” He allowed me to sit down and gave me a paper to write the statement. Although depressed, I wrote a few sentences: I am guilty of nothing. It is strange that you arrest me as a civilian wounded person and a patient without any evidence of crime. Even if there is evidence, according to international convention I should have been first cured and then arrested and possibly convicted. Do not have any fear I would escape because I am in your hands and I do not think about escape because I am not guilty. My only guilt can be because I am a Serb during this war and that I belonged to the Serbian Democratic Party, which was legal, as well as two other national parties (the Croatian Democratic Party and the Democratic Action Party)”. I did not sign the statement. The investigator looked at the statement and noticed it was written in Cyrillic. He asked me if I knew other alphabet – I told him that I did, but that I usually use the Cyrillic. He did not like it and I felt a button strike on my back and head. The investigator stopped the battery.

During my “treatment” (for about two hours), we could hear the shots in the prison compound. I had a feeling these shots were ending someone’s life. According to stories of their patients, and later the convicts we served sentence with, many Serbs brutally lost their life there

I was taken to cell 78 at about midnight on that particular day I was arrested. I found a prisoner in the cell 78, I think his name was Stanojević, a retired Yugoslav National Army (JNA) Sergeant Major. Next morning, in the daylight I noticed his head was blue and swollen and a part of his forehead was covered with dried blood. I asked him about the reason he was arrested and about that on his forehead. He answered he was accused of possessing a sniper, although they did not find it when searching his flat. He wiped his forehead and it started bleeding again. You could see, and he told me that too, a carved sign of cross. He stayed with me a night and a day and was taken at about 10 p.m. by their police next evening. I think he was murdered, because I did not see him in the “Viktor Bubanj” and he was not sentenced, e.g. he was not sent to serve his sentence in the Central Prison.

I stayed in the cell no. 78 for 4 days, alone. During all that time the police officers barged in yelling: ”You are the Chetnik, collaborator of Karadžić“, cursing my mother and family, slapping me and striking me with button. I wanted their investigator to see me. He came and asked me what I wanted.

I asked for water and my wounds re-dressed. They gave me some water; I could not eat anything of the food they brought to me twice a day. The truth is that the food was poor and of bite-sized. They did not dress my wounds; I got the answer that it was a prison, and not the hospital. After four days they took me with another 25 prisoners to “Viktor Bubanj”. “Viktor Bubanj” – torture location for the Serb men and women.

The “Viktor Bubanj” prison is a former JNA military prison, named now “Ramiz Salčin”. In this prison were on average 200 men and about 35 women. According to my estimation there were about 5000 Serbian men and women who went through this prison for the period of the 7 months I was there under investigation. There were 17 cells with the imprisoned Serbs.

The surface of the cell was 6 m² and there was only one bed at the time of JNA. In that area, where only one bed used to be, the Serbs were thrown one on top of the other on the concrete. On average there were about 12 of us in there. Only furniture that we had in there was a small piece of mat (0,70 m²) and a blanket. There was no heating, we were lice-infected, no hygiene, we did not wash our face for a month. They gave us water once a day, a litre per prisoner, which we used for drinking. As for the lice-infection, they gave us a powder that was inefficient. It only made us cough and sneeze.

I put lice, covered by the powder into a matchbox and they lived even after 7 days. I have shown it to the prison warden **Himzo Dolan**

He verbally attacked me: “You mortal being, what came to your mind?”

There were many sleepless nights also because of lice we removed and killed. Every day were fighting for the light to kill the lice in order to sleep a few hours next night.

I remember Dragan Boljugija found and killed 500 lice on his white shirt, which his girlfriend brought to him previous day. He said: “I will not do it any more, there are some small ones left”, because we also waited our turn for the same “action”

The food was bite-size. At about 10 a.m. we got a cup of bitter tea and 60 grams of bread and about 4 p.m. – 60 grams of bread and a plate of some cooked meal, usually some watery soup with some rice and a few pieces of macaroni. Due to such conditions, the prisoners lost their weight rapidly with constant physical and mental mistreatment.

The nights were very hard. You could hear sobbing from the cells by the prisoners that were taken out of their cells upon some order into offices of duty police officers to be beaten there and then returned half- dead to the cells. We threw water to wake them up, rendered “first aid” moving to make them stretch their blue and swollen body. The police officers usually beat with buttons, cables, bars, automatic rifle stocks, fists and feet. They usually kicked me into genitals, since I used crunches. I tried to protect myself with putting some army blouse and trousers and by putting old shirts between the

legs to cushion their kicks. There were many urinating blood for days, like me. Every morning, before officials arriving, they took out some healthier and younger prisoners to clean the blood of the prisoners in the corridor. There was a period when a stomach infection with diarrhoea occurred. They resolved it with giving us some buckets in the cells to defecate there in order not to disturb their police officers during the night to take us out to toilet. Every need for toilet during the night caused yelling and battery. We were forced to do it in the cells and to take it out in the morning and to pour it into the toilet secretly. We asked to be allowed to get out twice a day and at about 8 p.m. in the evening. The biggest criminals amongst them (although no one was a good one) were as I remember: **Kemo Dautović**, **Fahro Alić**, some **Mrđa**, **Himzo Dolan** – prison warden.

Himzo Dolan took us out without our shirts off to the prison compound at about 8 p.m. on the 27th of January 1993 at the temperature of minus 20 degrees centigrade. He kept us there about 2 hours to get some clean air, and the reason was a song named “*Odakle si sele*²” that some police officers allegedly heard during the night. He stressed he would conduct a special investigation the following days and we will speak about it and that he was an experienced police officer and a former JNA security officer. He kept his word and the following days were the days of torture regarding that song. These were only motives for torture and quiet kills. Majority of the prisoners were intellectuals and young people, but there were some old men and women of age of eighty, as well as the pregnant women. I remember a whole family taken to prison, father and mother with two daughters, only because the husband allegedly was a retired JNA colonel.

The prisoners were living skeletons after the mass diarrhea epidemic. We found that they put some nitrogen into our food, a nitrogen compound that destroys blood and protein. There were many intellectuals in the prison: biologists, chemists, doctors, economists, lawyers, engineers and university professors.

There were Borislav Herak and Damjanović, charged with war crimes, in the cell. They were tried as war criminals and death penalty imposed.

It was strange that the prison authorities treated those two in different way. Damjanović was tortured, beaten up, even **Ismet Bajramović aka Ćelo** shot from pistol next to his head. Borislav Herak got the cigarettes from the officials, extra food. The Red Cross clothes for the prisoners were specially separated for him. He was more protected and taken care of than their – the Muslim prisoners, who were under investigation. Both of them were sentenced to death and that is why I do not understand such different treatment during the investigation and the indictment and the verdict were the same for both of them. Serving my sentence in the Central prison I also heard from the prisoners that he, although convicted as a war criminal, was protected by the prison

²TRANSLATORS NOTE: Sister, where are you from

authorities and police in comparison to Damjanović, who pleaded not guilty for all the acts he was charged with. Even nowadays I do not understand why they treated Herak, let's say, favourably.

CELLS OF DEATH

Nobody knows how many people were killed in the Muslim investigation prison of the „Viktor Bubanj“ barracks. Going through my memories, the people were dying of battery, hunger, cold, snipers when being taken to forced labour... I will list some of the names of died, murdered and missing people. I have to take a deep breath when listing those names: **Uroš Rakanović, Zoran Odžaković, Mato Ćeranić, Petar Kuzmanović, Radoje Marinković, Slobodan Matović, Savka Damjanović, Mihajlo Radočić, Nedeljko Živković, Stevo Drakulić, Pero Pikulić, Vojko Radović, Vojin Vukadin, Stanko Turanjanin, Novica Ničević, Aleksandar Matić, Šiljegović, -Stevo Mišević, Čajević, Collonel Bracanović** ...When someone dies they put him in a blanket and throw into the corridor. I heard they were throwing them into the garbage containers. Our prisoners brought 4 dead bodies, which were not identified, from the fifth floor of the Military prison. **Ostoja Šoja** was killed by a sniper during the forced labour on the 19th of December 1993. The Serb prisoners were the target of the Muslim snipers when being on forced labour in the town.

INVESTIGATION AND TRIAL

After being taken to the Investigative prison, I was interrogated ten days later by two investigators from the Public Security Centre, as they introduced themselves. They conducted the interrogation following some notes that they had, with questions: why I was member of SDS, how did I cooperate with the JNA, why did we organized and armed Serbian people etc. I answered that I was a member of SDS, which was a legal party as well as other two national parties SDA and HDZ and that I did not feel guilty and had nothing to do with the war that broke out. “You put me, sick and wounded, into prison with no evidence” Two days later they gave me a printed record, which I read and refused to sign, because the essence of statement was not there. The police officer then beat me in the cell. Two days later I was taken to the interrogation again. The interrogation was properly conducted with clear dictating. I got warned to tell the truth and a list of 40 people was presented to me, by that judge, who read those names starting from Dr. Kardžić, Krajišnik... warning me that those were war criminals. He asked me if I knew them and whether I was related to them and I negated it. My statement was

based on the statement I previously made before the Security Service Centre inspectors. Therefore, I only admitted I was a member of SDS, which was a normal thing within the new political pluralism.

I belonged to the political party of my people. I contested everything else: There was no need to cooperate with the former JNA, since it was the joined Army of the so called BiH. **All that they tried to impute, happened in 1991, at the time when Bosnia and Herzegovina was not recognized, e.g. it was a part of the former Yugoslavia.**

Next day the interrogation was conducted by a person named **Ignjac**. He was very arrogant and did not allow me to sit down, although I used crutches. The interrogation was conducted same way as the previous one, insisting on same things and forcing me to admit what they wanted me to. The police officer **Kemo Dautović** struck me with a button a few times in front of the judge, who introduced himself to conduct the interrogation in the role of the public prosecutor. I signed the record. New interrogation was at night at 10 p.m. At the same interrogation same questions with my same answers. I received the Decision on Custody, pursuant to Articles 119, 136/2 and 139, under the threat of death penalty, because those are criminal acts of subversion of the BiH State.

The decisions were arriving every month and I gave them to the prisoners to smoke them, because they did not have cigarette paper. Others criticized me for not keeping them. I knew I would get the other ones. I received the Indictment and Date of Summons scheduled for 25th of December 1992. The Indictment was very severe; “threat of death penalty”.

The trial did not take place, the new Court hearing is summoned for 13th of January 1993. I appeared at the trial with 42 kg of weight with crutches. I felt a small comfort seeing there the Trial Chamber, let them sentence me to death finally. The Chairman of the Chamber was the Judge **Fahrudin Teftedarija**. The trial lasted for 15 minutes. The Indictment was read and I was asked to say what I had to say. I stated as follows: I remain with my Statement, I made during the interrogation. I am a civilian, wounded and sick person, arrested in Traumatology of the Sarajevo Hospital. It is exodus to put me on the trial. I am not a war criminal; you do not have evidence that I am guilty as charged. I only belonged to the legal political party of my people.

You only have my statement, which was partly forced with physical torture.

Judge Teftedarija was furious regarding my statement. The public defender disputed the Indictment as I did, he pointed out that I should be not tried but treated. Nothing helped – 15 years of imprisonment. The mitigating circumstances were – and older and sick person, a big comfort. I lodged an appeal. The Supreme Court confirmed the Verdict, denying all facts I presented as my defence.

A medical worker - veterinary technician told me I should ask for transfer into Central Prison before the Final Judgment was issued. He was the one, who was very aware my health condition, giving me “good services”. He removed the cast from my leg with the pliers, hammer and fruit scissors. Two of their criminals held me during this “operation” and I was holding myself to a seedling in the prison compound.

After the effort that lasted for two hours, the cast was off, the leg got black and the muscles got atrophied. He would have not removed the cast even then, had I not showed him the wound, which got infected – became wormy, because I did not get any medication, nor I was dressed.

I bandaged the wounds with some old shirts – rags, putting the coltsfoot and strawberry leaf that I picked in the compound during the walk. Whenever I asked his services, medical help from him, he responded: “This is not hospital, this is a prison and you know what you did”.

I was transferred to the Central Prison on the 6th of February 1992 and I felt some relief. I lied in the bed after 250 days, lice disappeared, I had three meals a day or some kind of it, and more professional attitude of the prison staff to the prisoners.

The International Red Cross recorded us in March 1993 and I sent the first message to my family. The International Red Cross doctors examined me and recommended the prescribed therapy (remedies, laboratory, ECG and others) to the Prison Health Service and the Management. They told me they would ask for my unconditional acquittal from so called BiH Judiciary.

During the next visit of the International Red Cross I saw they requested it in writing. The Muslim authorities ignored it and nothing happened out of it. They gave me some remedies, referred me to do have ECG done outside the prison, in the MoI Clinic. I was surprised when they handcuffed me, and I still used a crutch. Somehow I came there limping and carrying a crutch with the handcuffs. The citizens and the patients were looking at me surprisingly; a tied disabled person, the crutch hangs on the handcuffs. The sergeant did not have the keys to take the handcuffs off, because the keys were at the commander **Hilmija**, who ordered my handcuffing. They succeeded somehow to do ECG. Although handcuffed I did not allow them to do laboratory findings, because I heard from the others, who gave blood samples, that they take a whole bottle for the transfusion for their Army. I did not have enough blood for such findings.

It was not easy to serve sentence together with Muslim prisoners, the criminals. They constantly provoked, and beat some of us like Đ.Đ. M.L. Dragan Zelić and others. Dragan Zelić (21) was isolated from others and murdered mysteriously one morning. Allegedly, he committed suicide. He was really little bit mentally disturbed due to mistreatment and battery in “Viktor Bubanj”.

The first message that I received from my brother Đorđe from Smederevo on the 6th of July 1993 was very sad for me. I learned that the Muslims killed my two sons, Slobodan and Velimir and my mother died of sorrow because of that information, my imprisonment, as well as because of looting of our family house in the village of Brđani, where she stayed with my wife Malina.

The prison authorities were aware of the fact and it made my situation even harder. They were provoking me all the time regarding my verdict, assuming that my sons were in Army of the Republic of Srpska.

They did not want to assume anything else, because they found justification for all that was Serb, the murders, ethnic cleansing and others.

There were weird trials and investigation procedures in so called Republic of BiH such as:

I.S. (62 years old) sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment for alleged missile guidance. He has a mirror in the flat.

Đ.Đ. (62 years old) crossed the line with a water bottle in Vogošća; he was arrested and sentenced to 6 years of imprisonment for being an enemy soldier, He was accused to be a sniper shooter. The man had medical proof that his eyes were operated and that he was treated in the mental institution Jagomir. It meant nothing to them.

P.S. (36 years old), an architect from Sarajevo was sentenced to 2 years of imprisonment for illegal possession of weapons. Searching his premises they found a few name tags of the prison police officers, what they usually wore in the lapel as official accreditation. It was the base to convict him and give him a new ten years sentence for “espionage”. It is characteristic to mention that the prisoners were tortured, besides, so called ordinary beating up, which caused hematoma, swellings.

B.V. One eye was poked out with knife.

Č.S. His hands were burned with red-hot iron. Both of them were sentenced to 3.5 years. Some of them had fingernails ripped out.

V.Č. Broken five ribs

B.Š. Broken clavicle and so on.

Serb women from the cells 17, 18, 19 were taken by the police officers at about 10 p.m. to “wash the dishes”. The police officers got drunk and abused them violently.

Ismet Bajramović Ćelo shot from the Magnum pistol next to heads of prisoners, scaring them.

EXCHANGE

Our hope and comfort was in the exchange of the prisoners. That was going very slowly. The prison authorities were usually exchanging the sentenced people with small sentences or if they already did their time. I was under big embargo and they did not let me to be exchanged although I was constantly requested by the Serb side and the international Red Cross insisted on my exchange and unconditional release, as a sick and wounded civilian.

That day came, November 9, 1994, when I was exchanged for two Muslim prisoners, doctors. It was the happiest day in my life, which I will celebrate regardless to my family tragedy and personal misfortune that I have survived – 30 months of torture in Muslim prisons. I came to my people, my state. What can I say when I am the tragedian of all wars.

In the last 100 years, only by natural cause died one uncle (Vaso) and the other 11 men aged from 25 to 40, got killed by Muslims and Croats.