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Viljevo

Translated from Croatian by Tomislav Kuzmanović

The events I'm going to describe took place in Osijek during the summer of 1943.

I remember those months as a time of deafness: on the world front, the war was at full swing, just as it was in inland Croatia, then in alliance with the Axis powers; but in Osijek itself, the capital of the Great Parish of Baranja and Kammerhofer's headquarters, the noise stopped. Katarina Garaj, Ignac Šlezinger and I, members of the isolated cell in the very heart of the town, were in charge of a radio station that transmitted weekly proclamations and kept daily contact with the liberated territories. From mid June to early September we worked out of a large four-bedroom apartment on the third floor of 9 Ustashe Street. The place, as far as I remember, used to belong to the Korskys or the Kohns. I don't know what happened to them. The deportations of Jews began back in the spring of 1941, after the synagogue had gone up in flames, and by mid August 1942, around 3,000 people in Osijek, together with dozens of families banished from other towns, were taken to Auschwitz or Jasenovac. After that, I often asked if fighting for this place made any sense at all.

What I'd like to reflect on here began more or less inconspicuously, in late July or early August. I can't go into details about our business. I can only say that we noticed the first spark of this occurrence precisely at the time of our illegal activities. Unfortunately, I no longer remember what it was exactly: one of our shows, or an encrypted transmission to one of our groups. I remember only that one evening someone heard brief interruptions in the sound, lasting for only a fraction of a second, machine-gunned with short periods of silence, as if coming from a broken speaker, losing contact somewhere in the wiring. We checked all of our equipment; everything seemed all right, but the disturbance came up again the following day, this time in the middle of Ustashe National Radio's daily program. Someone seemed to be trying to sabotage the signal. It lasted for hours.

We tried to get some information on it from other cells, but to no avail. The only thing we could do was to disassemble, check, and reassemble our equipment again. However, we found no glitches, and in the days to come the disturbance gradually amplified and became particularly intensive during our program, which made us think that it was some new technology of signal distortion, but it went on even between program frequencies, in the crackle of radio waves. Then a tape recorder came to someone's mind: we recorded about 30 minutes of that noise between stations, where the disturbance was the strongest and, one might say, the purest. While the microphone was turned towards the speaker, we conversed freely and without mention of the events that took place those days, about unimportant trivialities, which, when we did not transmit, made our everyday life similar to that in a prison or a monastery.

Several hours later, when we played the tape, we experienced two separate shocks.

The first shock came when we turned up the volume to enhance the intervals of 'quiet', that is, disturbances, which in the past few days made any activities on the radio impossible. It turned out this was not silence: every disturbance was in fact a short jolt, resembling the clicking of a switch of some kind, after which another sound could be heard – similar to a woman's voice.

The second shock was much stronger and had more layers. Almost at the same moment, we realized two things. Firstly, some words and sentences – sometimes fragmented or barely comprehensible, sometimes intelligible and linked into a series of thoughts – could be connected to the topics we were

discussing while the tape recorder did its work. Secondly, some of these sentences could be understood as 'answers' to particular questions we directed at each other during the recording.

I admit that at that moment panic temporarily struck. The thought that someone was listening in on us meant certain death: court martial in Osijek had the authority to liquidate all those accused of sabotage or propaganda. However, the confusion was short-lived. We realized that those listening in on us, if their intentions had been ill, would have acted long ago. The following hypothesis ensued: this was one of our cells, equipped with technology whose features were unknown to us, trying to reach us. But it was impossible to confirm this assumption due to the nonexistence of any protocol: the contact was established and broken seemingly at its own volition, without previous warning or announcement, the tone of the speech was completely unnatural, as if these were machines, but the content of the messages was friendly, without any special request but to answer, a daily repeated request to communicate, to respond.

When we accounted for all of this, it became obvious that in fact we didn't know anything: who were the people behind the transmissions, how they organized them technically, why they called in such an unusual way and with what purpose. Then we dedicated ourselves more intensively to these disturbances, recording and studying them. It turned out that it was enough to turn on the tape recorder to receive the message. This did not always work, but we no longer needed to comb through the noise of the radio waves between stations – we could simply plug in the tape recorder and start recording. We would not hear anything; nevertheless, the voice, quiet and feeble, remained on the tape, regardless of the fact that no radios were turned on in the room, regardless of the fact that there was no one there.

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No end... [24 cm damaged] it never starts nor ends... and if [1 minute 48 seconds of disturbance] because there's no physical channel towards them... only those dials... but how to explain this to anyone if these aren't phone or safe dials, something you can't put your hand on... navigating in a thick fog, impervious, without coordinates, sailing towards the signal's source that sends no messages, that only... tunes you, tightens and loosens, like a wire, sets you to a right frequency, into a free corridor... and that countdown, so to speak, before the other side opens... I flew out of my bed when he spoke, the same as any other voice, as if a living man were standing in the corner of the room, only perhaps hidden, waiting in ambush... all day the dogs were nervous, I could've sensed something was going on... it always sounded like that, those first few moments, it always began whenever, wherever, without introduction, without premonition, without mumbling or whispering, without noise that turned into speech: just like that, it was suddenly there, plain, a voice that could belong to anyone, but it could not join anyone, and no one could [16 seconds of disturbance] after midnight it is a different country, with completely different laws... I can't do anything, I'm thrown at their mercy, after midnight I have no choice, only a passage remains of me, like a pipe or a cable leading towards something we've actually never seen... like a space in which I no longer exist, neither does she, nor that third person, or however many there are, a legion [48 seconds of disturbance] never stops, at all, as if it never sleeps, first knocks come from the attic, they go on, the whole night, when we're still together, and then from the salon, lasting for days, like an armoured beetle, some belligerent, diluvial monster... pounding with its proboscis against the wall, which by some miracle protected us... she must have felt better then, on the

lam, when something was always going on, when she was useful, in charge, the unofficial prioress of our circle, when we were trying to get the others out of the flames, when the incineration had not yet threatened us... it's so hard to imagine it all now, as if it had never [10 cm damaged] transition time, when chaos hadn't yet set in, but when the word went around that the West had already collapsed, that the whole of the European Union looked like Siberia [8 seconds of disturbance] territory after nuclear explosion... in the end the wall in front of them rose so high that no one dared [3 seconds of noise] TV images, photographs, or witness accounts that confirmed everything that had been suspected... until they finally removed it from all stores and burned it, probably on the outskirts of some Osijek periphery, all such merchandise had labels saying, WARNING: this product contains ingredients of European origin... but we still thought all of that was just an exaggeration, we just couldn't imagine a breakdown that would send Europe back to some feudal winter, and [39 seconds of disturbance] we've always been a province, the edge of everything, backward and forgotten... relatively safe because of other centres in the region that were still active on the air, even though they created so many problems and spread fear for hundreds of kilometres around [15 centimetres damaged] something big, something serious began... to go on the run, again, now, after everything?... actually, I thought that this, this house, was after everything... everything had finished long before we settled here, and it really seemed as if... as if it all ended, the spitting of fire, death and destruction, we thought an end had come, that the gorge had shut... what remained was the washout of disaster, the mission of clearing out the ruins, in the heavens and on earth, at least that's [7 seconds of noise] on the run, without food, without place to sleep, that was too much, I thought I'd go mad, and when they stopped, for a long time after they'd stopped, I still listened, waited for them to start again... one tiny portion [inaudible] radar, on alert, always awake, combing the radio air, checking if someone could be heard somewhere, after all... but there was no one, not any more... I don't know what happened to them in the meantime... perhaps this is the answer to [18 seconds of disturbance] with such, with the washouts, this completely dry, mechanical speech, I feel sick from listening to it, as if I'm deciphering sounds from a machine... to be fair, I'm not there either [58 seconds of disturbance] where those high frequencies, above those who survived the catastrophe, could still affect all those under the sky, then that place should have a name like Viljevo... I have no idea if these ruins cause it or if [5 seconds of noise] energy effluvium dragging along the plains, but that name, the very name, Viljevo, the moment we passed the sign bearing that name... it's hard to say [inaudible] a pseudonym for something else, for something that's not a name of a place... I don't know what it is [inaudible] thousands of microscopic lights going off in total darkness, or a tingle of hundreds of miniature needles all over your body, the name [12 seconds of disturbance] sparkles even on a cloudy day like this, burns [inaudible] with the torrential rain... Viljevo... as if it means it all begins here... or it is activated... [9 seconds of silence]... or the window opens... [9 minutes and 15 seconds of silence]... something is happening.