

Full Translation

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Subject: **Interview with Halid ČENGIĆ**

The name of Halid ČENGIĆ first became public at the time of the famous strike in *Fočatrans* RO /work organisation/. When the SDA /Party of Democratic Action/ was established, he became a member of the SDA Main Board in Foča and that was the beginning of his political and military activities. His meeting with Dobrica ĆOSIĆ and confrontation with Fikret ABDIĆ at the First Congress of the SDA were noteworthy events. During the war he led the main logistics centre of the BH Army in Visoko... Because of the construction of the airport and alleged nepotism, he was often the target of severe criticism from both the opposition and the media.

General... ???

ČENGIĆ: Please, call me *Hadžija*, as you always have. I am not interested in titles, names or insignia. I always held the post of general. When they offered me the rank, I said that that was not the reason for what I was doing and that I never wore insignia because I am a soldier in the name of Allah, *dželle šanuhu* /May His holy being be revered/ and a soldier of our army...

You are often attacked by the media, but you rarely appeared in it. As far as I know - only once in *Oslobodenje*. Why?

ČENGIĆ: *Bismillahi-r-Rahmani-r-Rahim* /in the name of Allah, kind and merciful/. I have not said anything not because I have nothing to say, but because time has never been right. Maybe it is still not the right time, but I would like to accommodate *Ljiljan*. I gave an interview to *Oslobodenje* because I had been reading that newspaper for a long time and I felt that it would report objectively what I said, and because of the ratings it had at the time, but, unfortunately, since then, it has placed itself among...

Little is known about you. The terms "retired miller," "warehouse keeper" and so on are usually used about you. Who is the real *Hadžija*, Halid ČENGIĆ?

ČENGIĆ: I was born in 1933 in Odžak, near Foča. I graduated from the School of Economics and spent almost all my working life organising the finances in the

Ustikolina *Žitopromet* mill. My childhood was characterised by a patriarchal lifestyle in a rich bey household. I had a grandfather and a grandmother who had four sons and two daughters, and we all lived together. My earliest childhood memories are that my aunts were married, that one uncle was working in commerce in Belgrade, the other was studying at VIŠT /expansion unknown/ in Sarajevo. My father graduated from the *Medresa* /theological faculty/ in Foča and he also learned the carpenter's trade. The third uncle stayed in Odžak, to work the land. We all lived together. As a wealthy family, we had a lot of land even after the agrarian reform. Even after the Kingdom of Yugoslavia passed the agrarian law, we had plenty of land because, in addition to a fief, we had a large bey's estate. Until World War Two, we lived a comfortable life.

The Bosnian Yalta

You once stated that you did not follow Alija, you went alongside him. What were you trying to say by that? When did you meet Alija IZETBEGOVIĆ? Did you belong to an organisation called the *Young Muslims*?

ČENGIĆ: I was young, but I did not belong to that organisation. I first saw Alija at the founding assembly of the SDA in Sarajevo. I was brought up in a Muslim family in which Allah dž. š. /dželle šanuhu/ was revered above all else, and God's messenger Mohammed was considered the most significant man that had ever appeared. Those were our values. When a man accepts that as the philosophy of life, that is what nurtures him from within, and that was especially the case with us, in Odžak, where in four houses you had about ten people with higher education that they completed in Sarajevo, Istanbul, Foča. As far as I know, Alija also lived by the same principles and paid dearly for this.

How did you find out about the arrest of your son Hasan in 1983 during the famous trial of Muslim intellectuals and how did you take it? I know that you also had problems with the SDB /State Security Service/.

ČENGIĆ: I was at work one Saturday and the state agents came in and said: "Come with us, let's go home and talk!" Not knowing what was happening, I said that it was a work day and they replied: "You are done working for the day!" As I approached the house with them, I saw a large group of armed policemen around Odžak, their cars, heard their radios and saw that something major was going on. It was UDBA /State Security Service/ from Goražde and they were very rude. They searched the house for several hours, every corner, every piece of paper. They were searching for some evidence and when they saw that *Omer* was written on one of the books, they considered it very important material. I already realised at that point that Hasan had been arrested. I knew that the operation had begun because Mustafa SPAHIĆ had already been arrested. Hasan was arrested on 26 March but the arrest was registered as having occurred a day earlier. I was not upset at all. They took me to Goražde and I spent the night in the UDBA office. All night and day, questioning, interrogation, maltreatment...

Two years after that, you met Dobrica ĆOSIĆ and other Academicians, members of SANU /Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences/. Can you explain that in more detail? Who was in the group with you?

ČENGIĆ: The group consisted of Mustafa SPAHIĆ, Džemaludin LATIĆ (they had already been released from prison), Mrs Lejla AKŠAMIJA (daughter of Mr Alija IZETBEGOVIĆ), Azijada, the wife of Ismet KASUMAGIĆ and myself. The academician Ljuba TADIĆ took us to a famous restaurant in Belgrade, somewhere in the woods on Košutnjak because they only serve lamb there. We stayed there and talked for about three hours. We later realised that it was some kind of "Serb - Muslim, that is, Bosniak Yalta".

What did you discuss?

ČENGIĆ: Everything. I have to admit that our hosts did their best, they arranged us around the table so that each one sat next to one of the Academicians, and we could really talk. I was sitting next to Dr Božidar JAKŠIĆ and Dr Kosta ČAVOŠKI. Academician TADIĆ was sitting next to Kosta, Džemal next to him, then Mustafa, then Academician Dobrica ĆOSIĆ, then Lejla, Azijada... We discussed everything. Even then it was clear that a war was being prepared. I said to JAKŠIĆ: "Even though there is room for all of us under this sky, I can see that there will be war and that Belgrade is working on it." I said: "Everything is clear to me, but remember, there will be a blood-bath, but you will never defeat us."

What was their response?

ČENGIĆ: They did not respond. They just looked at us in wonder. They indiscreetly told us that a "new policy" was appearing, that they had worked it all out when it came to the SSUP /Federal Secretariat of the Interior/, UDBA, the army, that is the JNA /Yugoslav Peoples' Army/, from lower ranks all the way to that of general. They openly admitted that no general had agreed to cooperate.

Did they mention "Greater Serbia" then?

ČENGIĆ: No. They only spoke about the "new order" and "new Yugoslavia," which we immediately understood as a plan to create a "Greater Serbia". Later, after I had said this to Fikret ABDIĆ and was the first to attack him at the congress, he came to me during a break and we talked for about an hour! I said to him: "Fikret, my friend, don't you see what's happening? The Serbian Academy had come up with a plan for you Muslim atheists to condemn the religious Muslims and their intellectuals and to separate you from the people. And since the people are religious, they would thus separate you from the grassroots." I also said that to ČAVOŠKI in Belgrade: "This is what you are doing. You condemned these religious intellectuals, the same way they were condemned by the communist Muslims, to segregate the layman intellectuals from the people. You will later shut them up and try to leave the Muslim people leaderless." It was clear to me right away.

**It all began
with *Foča*trans**

Your political activities began when Hasan was released from prison. Did you discuss forming the SDA at that time?

ČENGIĆ: Hasan was released on 29 November 1987, Alija one year later, the SDA was formed on 26 May 1990 and that statement was made public on 7 March of the same year. There was no talk about the party until Alija and Omer were released from prison. At that time, the most important thing was for people to be released from prison. After Alija was released, the talk about the party began in small groups in Sarajevo and outside the country.

What was the role of Adil ZULFIKARPAŠIĆ at that time?

ČENGIĆ: While Hasan was in jail, Adil called me twice at home to ask how he could help, but I was at work. Really, he was doing his best at the international level, to help all the prisoners from the 1983 trial, and he also helped financially. He was involved. He knew a lot, so even Belgrade threatened him at one point...

Your political and military activities began with the case of Fočatrans. How did that happen?

ČENGIĆ: *Fočatrans* was only one indicator of what was about to happen in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Fočatrans* was a transportation company which maintained connections throughout Yugoslavia and Europe. According to their plans, it was supposed to transfer to Serb hands, so that MILOŠEVIĆ's anti-bureaucratic revolution could be brought into BH through it. That is indication enough that the Serbs had organised themselves beforehand and that this was the first time their plans were revealed, long before the SDA was formed...

You used that gain to form the SDA in Foča.

ČENGIĆ: Yes. People really trusted us. Senad ŠAHISPAŠIĆ Šaja also became completely involved. We then organised a gathering of a kind that had never been seen before on Pijesak, the plateau at the confluence of the Čehotina and Drina rivers. The people from Novi Sad, from whom we rented the loud speakers said that over 150,000 people were there. When we promised Alija and the people in the SDA headquarters a gathering of that size, they did not believe it. They said: "When Tito came to Tjentište, there were not even 70,000 people and you expect 100,000 at an SDA meeting." However, we kept our promise. At that gathering, you could see that the people wanted something new, a movement that would protect the interests of Bosniaks.

Foča was the centre for weapons. Several thousand guns were distributed throughout BH, from Ljubinje to Srebrenica. Even Naser ORIĆ came for weapons.

ČENGIĆ: I don't know whether it was really the centre, but we assisted a number of municipalities in BH as much as we could. When the weapons were brought to Foča, nobody was really supposed to know, much less take them into their house. Šaja complained to me and I said to him: "Take them to my house." And that's how it was. So, the problem was not in the weapons, but with the minds of the people and the organisation.

I buried the jewellery back in 1990

Some people criticised you and Šaja for making money from this!?

ČENGIĆ: Hadžija never sold a single rifle or bullet. All sorts of things were said by uninformed people, especially those who participated the least and did not want to participate in the defence of the country and the people. One should know that it was risky at the time to transport, store, or distribute weapons. One could be arrested at any time. With the help of some people from *Fočatrans* and despite thousands of problems Šaja drove people and bought weapons. Right at the time of the meeting in Karadorđevo, he and some people waited 50 days for a delivery in Zagreb because Gojko ŠUŠAK had promised him 5,000 guns. He came without a single rifle. He was told that they had not arrived from the US. I said to him: "No, Senad, my friend, time will tell that the Serbs and the Croats made a deal." He said that it was not possible, and I said: "You'll see." Fifteen days later, I went to Mostar with my brother-in-law. We met with his friend Nikola MANDIĆ, general manager of Croatia Bank and a deputy in the SFRJ Assembly. I said to him: "Nikola, you made a deal with the Serbs." He jumped up from his chair and said angrily: "Don't ever say that again. The Croats could never make a deal with the Serbs." I said to him: "I don't know whether they could or couldn't, but, when it comes to us, you made a deal." He looked at me perplexed and it was clear to me that they had made a deal. It was May 1991 and that confirmed my assessment of the situation, expectations of what was about to happen. Right after that, as we were walking around town, we ran into Enver KRESO. I told him that I had heard that Mostar would be levelled. He looked at me perplexed, as if I was some fool and said: "Come on, Hadžija, stop talking nonsense."

Many people from Foča still blame you and Šaja for failures at the beginning and for what happened to them in the war. Could you have done more for Foča?

ČENGIĆ: Of course more could have been done if those people, the usual critics, had wanted to do more. It is enough for me to say that when we went to the Foča Municipal building, there was not a single person from Foča there. It was only people from the villages. However, there were many practical problems as well. Before the war, there were 2,500 more Serbs than us and Foča was a strategic location for the JNA...

You formed the first PL /expansion unknown/ unit in BH.

ČENGIĆ: At the time of defending *Fočatrans*, already on 1 August 1990, we had a platoon armed with automatic weapons, a machine gun and a mortar. They all had camouflage uniforms and they pledged their allegiance in the Ustikolina mosque, with their hands on the Kur'an. The deceased Husein ČAVRK, a BH Army major decorated with a *Golden Lily* award was the unit commander. He was killed on Preljuća near Goražde. Kemo KARIŠIK inspected this unit while it was still a company, in September 1991.

Foča was defended for nine days, the area of Sutjeska for six months, Grebak for one year. After you left Odžak, there were many rumours such as "Hadžija left with a load of money"!?

ČENGIĆ: That is a lie. There have always been evil people and there always will be evil people. Thank God, there are many people from Ustikolina who are still alive. They know everything. I was the last to leave Odžak with my wife and daughter. Had it not been for the deceased Husein, I don't know what would have happened. I did not want to go because I was afraid that the defenders would lose confidence. Husko came several times to tell me to go. He believed in me as a man and his neighbour; we started fighting together and he made me leave. He took me out of Odžak. I first went to Jabuka, then to Pazarić, then to Visoko. I buried my wife and daughter's jewellery back in 1990, so that grass was already growing on that spot while I was still in Odžak. When I returned to Odžak for the first time (1996), some people were there. I barely managed to find the place and dig up this "fortune" everybody was talking about right in front of them. Whatever savings I had, I invested in guns.

When you reached Visoko, you became a very influential and powerful man - the commander of GLOC /?main logistics centre/. How did that happen?

ČENGIĆ: I continued working. I was a member of the SDA Main Board. I attended a meeting (on 10 May, I believe) and I realised that things were not going the way I thought they should. You could not go from Visoko to Moštre or Zenica, not to mention Sarajevo. Hasan and Rasim crossed over some mountains to get to Zenica. I suggested that roads be cleared immediately. Many of them criticised me, but, knowing what had happened in Eastern Bosnia, I insisted on it. Things improved later and I remained there the entire time.

General Rasim DELIĆ was with you the entire time until he became commander of the BH Army. It is often pointed out that you are the one most responsible for his promotion, that you appointed him to that position!?

ČENGIĆ: Rasim had no military position at that time and he was in charge of carrying out some specialist military duties. My son Hasan was in charge of the key tasks in logistics. I saw that resources were slow in coming and I told Hasan that he should go to Zagreb. I heard that a lot was being stolen. The aid intended for the army was disappearing. Hasan went and we stayed here. We had a meeting in Zenica sometime around 30 May. About 50 people were present. Since Sarajevo was blocked, I recommended that a body be formed which would lead the resistance in the free territories. Unfortunately, my proposal was not accepted. Only six people voted for it. Hilmo NEJMARLIJA and the deceased Alija ALIHODŽIĆ chaired the meeting. After returning to Visoko, I went to Hilmo and explained what I meant. We went to the municipal chief Kenan to call President Alija. I asked that connections be established at least within the army so that the defence of the country could be organised, because everything was dispersed at the level of the municipalities or even local communes. The president told Sefer HALILOVIĆ to call Rasim and see what we wanted. Sefer called Rasim and asked him what the *hodjas* and *hadjis* from Visoko wanted. Rasim explained our request to him and he then told President Alija. Immediately after that, an order came to form the forward post of the VK /supreme command/ of the General Staff of the BH Army in Visoko. Rasim, Rašid ZORLAK, Asim DŽAMBASOVIĆ and I met after that. I recommended that Rasim be the commander of the VK command post, Rašid his deputy and DŽAMBASOVIĆ the first commander of the Visoko Tactical Group.

Which role did you play?

ČENGIĆ: Logistics.

How does GLOC fit into that?

ČENGIĆ: Some type of a logistics centre was formed back in 1991 and Senahid MEMIŠ and Sulejman VRANJ managed it for a while. When I arrived, I took over. Sule had the task of working on transporting the materials; that is what President IZETBEGOVIĆ ordered him to do.

You have not given an answer to the question whether you appointed DELIĆ to be BH Army commander?

ČENGIĆ: I did not appoint him, President Alija did. I only recommended him. That man readily gave his time, his energy, his work. He worked as much as he could. When he came here, I liked his character first. I judged him as a man of character with whom one could work. I will not discuss the issue of education, since everybody knows about it, but I had a conversation with Hasan on one occasion just after I had arrived and while we were discussing who could be commander, he said that of all the officers he met, Rasim was the most mature.

I know that a military coup was planned several times

How many weapons passed through your hands, or rather the GLOC warehouses? Could you at least estimate the value in monetary terms?

ČENGIĆ: You can't. Our lives have no price, and neither does the equipment that came through GLOC. If it was not for them, we would not be here either. It was a large quantity of weapons, but you could not compare that with the weapons we have today. These weapons saved the country and our lives. President Alija promised 100,000 dollars for one TF /expansion unknown/ rocket to be brought in during the embargo. Nobody could or wanted to bring it and that rocket cost only several thousand dollars. There was no money for anybody to bring it. There were heroes and brave men in this war, and I consider those who worked on logistics from the outside and made sure we had these funds to be among them. Our biggest gain is being alive, saving the land and the people, and having a state. Because, if it had not been for that, we would not be sitting and talking here today and neither would the journalists who are talking about the profits we made.

Some generals and media are accusing you of having changed the character of the army from a multi-ethnic one to a Bosniak one, using your brother-in-law Sulejman VRANJ as the main personnel officer in the BH Army.

ČENGIĆ: That was also one of the lies and deceits. After I arrived in Visoko, I met the policeman Čedo DOMUZ. That man died for his Bosnia, for justice, and not for Muslims. Naturally, DOMUZ was not the only Serb or Croat who fought in the BH Army and none of them was chased away, nor did I do anything to him because he

was not a Muslim. Whoever fought for Bosnia is a hero and a great man as far as I am concerned.

As a soldier and the main logistics officer you saw many theatres of war, knew all the corps, knew what they had...

ČENGIĆ: Except for Srebrenica and Goražde, and Krajina while it was under siege, I visited all the corps and almost all the toughest theatres of war. I visited the command posts and theatres of war with President Alija, Commander DELIĆ and other commanders, people from the SDA, so that I could personally see what the situation in the units was like, to see how to help if there was a way to do so. I worked day and night. I put my physical and mental abilities at the disposal of the BH Army and I believe that people respect that. Many of those younger than me could hardly keep up that pace.

Still, Sefer often accuses you of having MTS /equipment and materiel/ that you would not give to anybody!

ČENGIĆ: That is not true. The Supreme Command knew about everything that was happening in GLOC and was in charge of the distribution. Sefer has other reasons in addition to this. The problem is that Sefer's political ambitions are now coming out and today we can see what he wanted. I know that a military coup was planned several times.

There is serious talk now that you had your own aeroplane factory next to the airport in Visoko - on Odžak!

ČENGIĆ: I wish I did. Not one, but thousands of factories, so that these people would have employment. Unfortunately, those are just somebody's fantasies. You see, the critics did guess some things correctly, so perhaps, God willing, they may have foreseen my airport, but not in this world but the next one, when God rewards me for working on it, working for something permanent. My life is short and transient and I cannot wrap an airport up like a rug and take it into the next world. It will stay in this country for the people to whom it belongs.

The Dayton Peace is humiliating for us

Was it your idea to build an airport in Visoko?

ČENGIĆ: No, but people often do not understand the advantages of this location. There is almost no place in the world with an airport in the middle of a city like Sarajevo. Also, it is 100m from the Serbian entity. When they started making that airport, a man from Split came here and told me that Americans in Split had set up an office for monitoring the airport. See, there were foreign countries that really wanted to help us, which were ready to send a cargo plane to land somewhere and never take off again, just to bring MTS. We had no such place. The BH Presidency made a decision in 1992 to build an airport in the Visoko locality.

Did an aeroplane ever land at that airport?

ČENGIĆ: Our people should know what our enemies know. Had it not been for that airport, maybe we would not have come through this. Omer KULIĆ was the first one to land on 19 April 1994 when we had nothing. If the Serbs knew that, they could have walked in here. Kula brought us some raw materials for weapons production and other necessary supplies. That little plane landed in Visoko on several occasions. In 1995, other special planes started landing as well, carrying other kinds of military equipment. That is when the campaign started to stop us. Those who saw it and who learned about those supplies knew their potential and concluded that there could be an escalation of war. They saw that we could target larger enemy centres and seriously change the course of the war, and they did their best to stop us. I mean the foreign centres of power. Dayton happened soon after that. This was helped by the fact that we dug the second tunnel under the runway in three and a half months, and that the siege of Sarajevo no longer had a purpose. The world then invented the Dayton Peace to stop us.