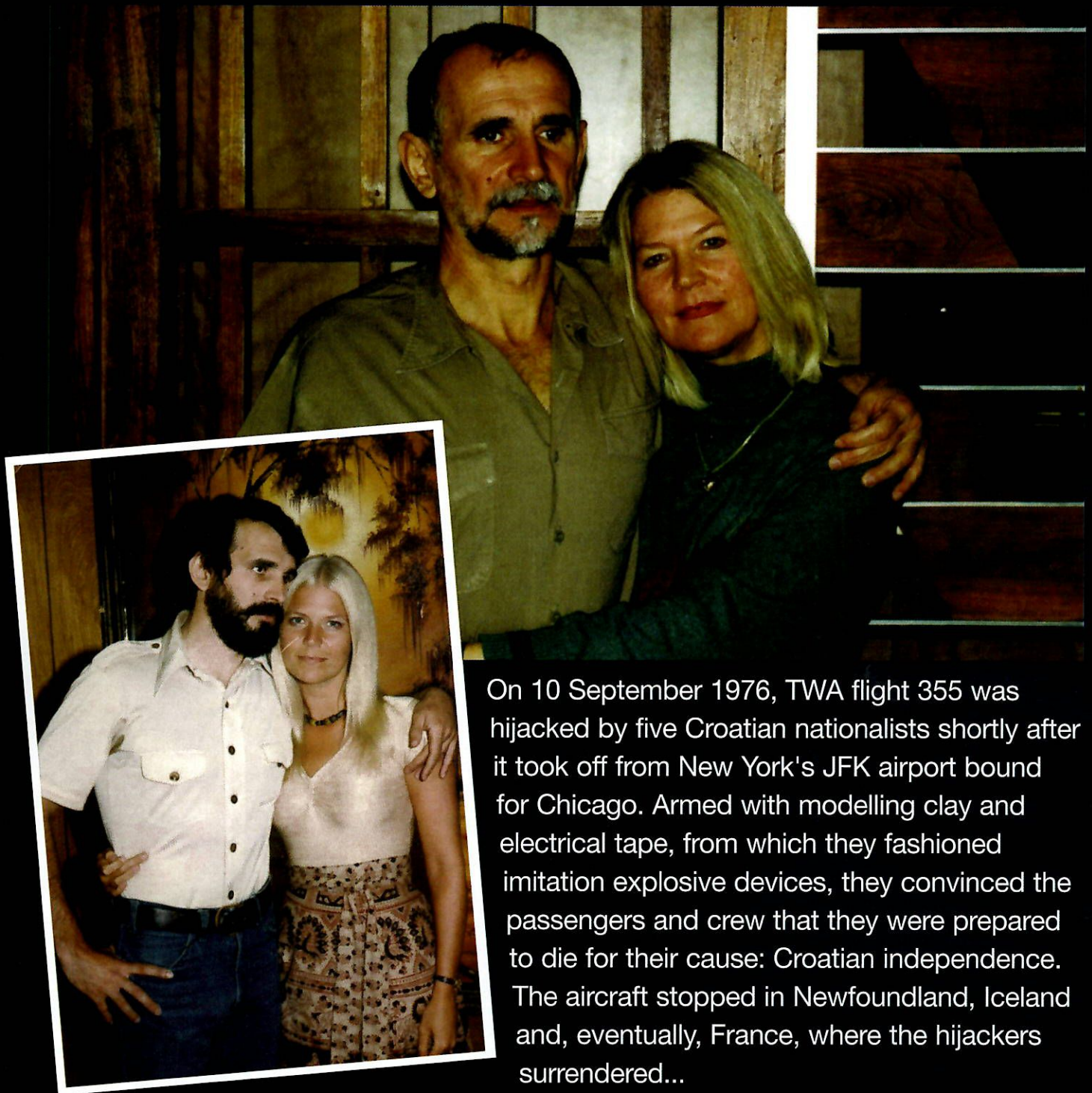


ZVONKO & JULIENNE BUSIC:

an ASI exclusive interview



On 10 September 1976, TWA flight 355 was hijacked by five Croatian nationalists shortly after it took off from New York's JFK airport bound for Chicago. Armed with modelling clay and electrical tape, from which they fashioned imitation explosive devices, they convinced the passengers and crew that they were prepared to die for their cause: Croatian independence. The aircraft stopped in Newfoundland, Iceland and, eventually, France, where the hijackers surrendered...

The perpetrators had, however, also left real explosives in a locker at Grand Central Station, the aim being to convince the authorities that the fake explosives on board the aircraft were also real. Tragically, Brian Murray, a policeman, was killed trying to defuse the device, despite the hijackers having provided directions on how to render it harmless.

Zvonko Busic, the lead hijacker, and his American wife, **Julienne**, who was also on board, were both sentenced to life imprisonment with parole eligibility after ten and eight years respectively. **Julienne** was paroled after 13 years, but **Zvonko** remains in gaol, 28 years later.

Croatia is now an independent state, the judge's recommendation that **Zvonko** serve only ten years has long been exceeded, and **Julienne Busic** is still actively campaigning for **Zvonko's** release and deportation to Croatia. She has lived in the Republic of Croatia since 1995, and speaks to **Philip Baum** about the hijacking itself and **Zvonko's** continued imprisonment, which she believes to be a grave injustice.

Facing page: **Zvonko & Julienne Busic** as they were (inset) circa 1979 and 20 years later (top).

PB: When and where did you meet **Zvonko**?

JB: In 1969, in Vienna, Austria. We were both University students at the time, and as fate would have it, we happened to meet while walking along the main street one afternoon. Suddenly, our lives were changed forever.

PB: What were you both studying?

JB: I was studying German language and literature and **Zvonko**, Eastern European history and languages.

PB: How did you first become involved in revolutionary activities?

JB: I was never involved in revolutionary activities, unless you count the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations I participated in, like many of my generation, in the 1960s. After I met **Zvonko**, and ultimately fell in love with him, I agreed to throw some anti-government leaflets from a skyscraper in the centre of Zagreb, Croatia. What for Americans is a triviality represented a heinous crime to **Tito's** dictatorship, and after I was arrested, I was forced to go to trial. Fortunately, probably because I was a young girl and an American, I was sentenced only to a month, time served. A Croatian citizen at that time would have gotten fifteen years. But at that point, I'd say I did it all for love – I was still too naïve and uninformed about politics to have had any deeper political commitment towards Croatian independence then.

PB: Who first came up with the concept of hijacking an aircraft and what was your goal?

JB: My husband had the idea, and it came from sheer desperation. The Yugoslav Secret police had been assassinating Croatian dissidents around the world, many of them our friends and even relatives. We were shot at twice, once in Berlin, and another time in

Frankfurt. We moved to the United States and still the threats continued. All our legal attempts to bring the situation to the attention of the press and authorities failed. At the time, the U.S. and Yugoslavia were close allies and America was not interested in criticising **Tito**. Even the FBI told us they couldn't do anything until something actually happened which would, of course, have been too late.

So we had the choice of waiting to be killed and living in constant fear, or sacrificing our freedom to alert the world to **Tito's** state-terrorism, which was how many journalists and policymakers referred to his government, including the former US ambassador to the former Yugoslavia, **Laurence Silberman**. The one and only goal of the hijacking was to force the world media to print the truth about the human rights abuses in former Yugoslavia, the imprisonment of dissidents, the murders and assassinations. To force them to do their job, in other words.

PB: Aside from the hijacking, was **Zvonko** involved in any other revolutionary actions?

JB: He was involved prior to the hijacking only in peaceful actions, such as demonstrations and public speaking. He's known throughout his village in Bosnia-Herzegovina, even today, for always being a mediator, a conciliator. He's never been in a fistfight, even as a boy.

PB: How much planning went into the hijacking?

JB: There were only a few months of planning, consisting mainly of my xeroxing pages about airplanes from the public library. Even that information provided little help, since I was not capable of interpreting it correctly, and that's why the plane had to stop several times along the way to refuel. It wasn't equipped to fly the entire route to Europe otherwise. And then

leaflets had to be written and translated, of course. Those were the parts I was involved in.

PB: Why did you select TWA? And why a flight from New York to Chicago?

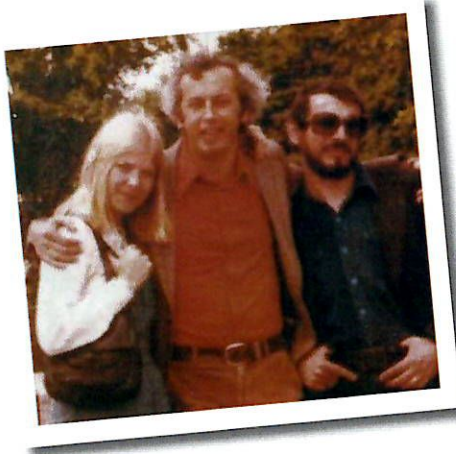
JB: It was sheer chance, because TWA was one of the international lines and we thought, incorrectly, that it could fly non-stop to Europe. As for the route, that also was arbitrarily chosen.

PB: How many people were "in the know"?

JB: Only my husband and myself until the end, when he chose three other Croatian men he felt were trustworthy, plus a Croatian dissident relative in Europe, Bruno Busic, who wrote the leaflets that were ultimately dropped during our flight over several major cities in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. Bruno was murdered soon thereafter in Paris, in 1978, shot five times in the back and head by the Yugoslav Secret Police, probably partly due to their belief that he'd been involved in our case.

PB: How did you feel at the airport before boarding?

JB: As though it were happening in somebody else's life. You have to bear in mind that I was the average, all-American girl, brought up to respect the law and live a productive life. The leaflet-throwing before had been done out of love for Zvonko, a need to prove myself, but by 1976 I had become aware of the repression he, his family, and his people, the Croatians, lived under during Tito's reign, and so had to choose whether to violate man-made law in the service of a higher law, a natural law. I was acting this time on the basis of a fear that my husband would soon be murdered and also deep political beliefs that the criminality of the Tito regime had to be publicised and stopped before it was too late.



Zvonko & Julienne Busic (right and left) with Bruno Busic (centre), who wrote the leaflets that were ultimately dropped over the U.S., Canada, and Europe.

PB: What happened at the security check?

JB: Absolutely nothing, because we had no weapons, only a metal pot and some clay, which would later be used to fashion something that looked like a bomb. This was 28 years ago and things were a lot different then. Today I'm sure this would have been highly suspicious. But we were adamant about not having any weapons on the plane because we wanted to be sure nobody could possibly be hurt.

PB: How was the hijacking actually initiated?

JB: My husband simply went into the cockpit and handed a note to the pilot, saying the plane was hijacked, and that the only demand was the printing of the leaflets in the major newspapers. At that time he also gave detailed instructions about the device in the locker at Grand Central Station so it could be found right away and rendered harmless. Detailed deactivation instructions were also left along with the explosives in the actual locker.

PB: What was the purpose of the bomb at Grand Central Station?

JB: Real explosives were left in an isolated locker at Grand Central Station, and their only purpose was to convince the authorities there were real weapons on the plane so that the leaflets would be printed.

PB: What was the reaction of crew and passengers once they realised the flight had been hijacked?

JB: It varied, of course. At first, there was some panic until the passengers realised we were not "lunatics" as they themselves expressed it. Of course we knew the explosives we had on board were not real, but they did not, so they felt great fear in the beginning. After they got to know us better, they said they became more relaxed. Then they read the leaflets and most told us they supported the Croatian cause for independence based on what they'd read, and wondered why they knew nothing about this issue. At various stops, approximately forty passengers were released, those who had medical problems, pressing engagements, weddings, graduations, etc. And some of the passengers who could have left actually said they wanted to stay on the plane until the end, that they considered it an "adventure". After our arrest, many of them wrote letters to our trial judge asking for leniency, and for years afterwards, several corresponded with me directly and even visited me in prison. One told me he could envisage one of his own daughters getting involved in something similar. It was a human situation, and people who can identify with the heart and not just the mind were the ones who kept in touch, wrote to the judge, visited me, and so forth. This didn't mean they approved, it only meant they could identify with us on a human level. That's a rare quality, especially in these current times when everyone and everything tends to be lumped together and stereotyped.

PB: The first European country you reached was Iceland. Was there

any negotiation with Icelandic authorities?

JB: I honestly don't remember anything about that. All I know is that another plane was engaged for dropping the leaflets, because it would have been unsafe for them to be dropped from our plane, so we wanted a second plane to be used.

PB: And from Iceland you flew to France. How did the French authorities handle the situation?

JB: Everybody was furious with the way the French handled the situation, the pilots included. First they shot out the tires of the plane as soon as we landed, and then they surrounded it with sharpshooters, which terrified everybody. They refused to bring the passengers food and drink or to empty the toilets. And all we wanted was to confirm the leaflets had been printed in the newspapers so

that we could surrender, but they refused to discuss that or anything else with the pilot until the very end, and thus prolonged everything unnecessarily. I read an excellent book recently by British author, John Griffiths, (Hostage: History, Facts and Reasoning behind Hostage-Taking) on the issue of hostage-taking and negotiations. It should be required reading for everyone who might someday find himself in the role of negotiator.

PB: I understand you left the aircraft in France. Why?

JB: I left with the co-pilot and another passenger, while everyone else stayed behind. I was so relieved finally to be allowed to make a phone call to New York and confirm the printing of the leaflets so that the ordeal could end. All we wanted was that piece of information so that we could surrender and the passengers could go home safely.

PB: How long after the ordeal began did this take place?

JB: It was many, many hours, I don't remember how many exactly, but it seemed like years.

PB: Who did you call in New York and what did they tell you?

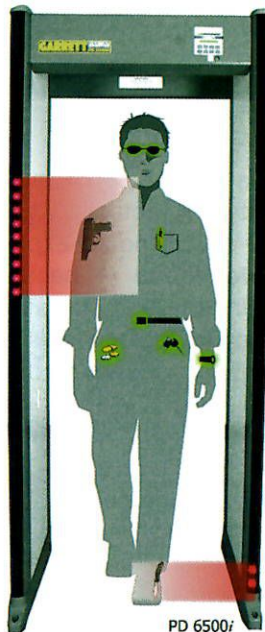
JB: I tried to call three people we felt we could trust, but only one was able to say he thought the leaflets had been printed. That was good enough, and the surrender took place shortly thereafter.

PB: How did you feel when you heard of the policeman's death in New York?

JB: It's impossible to describe the depth of my shock and sorrow. At first, I thought it was a trick to force us to surrender, that somebody had mocked up the newspaper article. I simply

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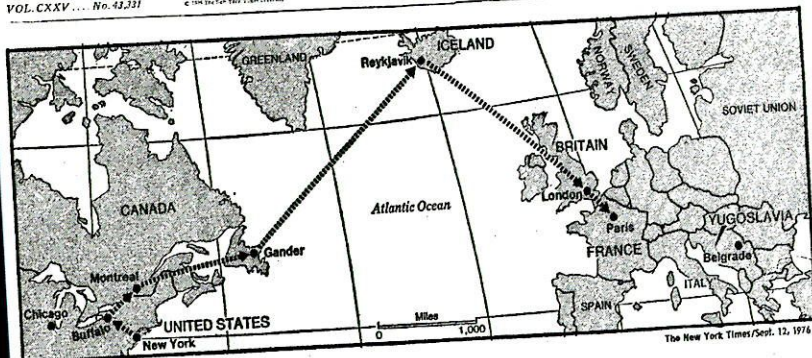
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VOL. CXXV... No. 43,331

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 1976



Ispravljena linija prikazuje put aviona otetog na letu od New Yorka do Chicagoa.
Broken line indicates course of the airliner that was hijacked Friday night during flight from New York to Chicago.

Press cuttings from the Busic archive

5 Cities Blitzed With Leaflets



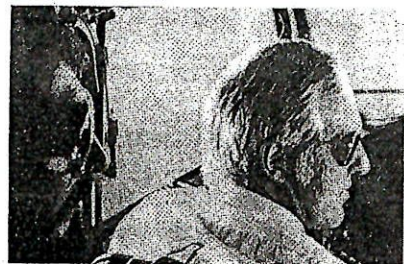
Julie Bušić, Gary Greco (taoc)

Five Cities Bombarbed With Leaflets

By HERNARD VALERY
Staff Correspondent of The News

Paris—Croatian nationalists who hijacked an American jet from New York's LaGuardia Airport across the Atlantic with 53 hostages had New York, Chicago, London, Paris and Montreal bombarded with leaflets yesterday to dramatize their demands for Croatian independence from Yugoslavia.

Zvonko Bušić, Richard Carey (kapetan)



refused to believe it, didn't want to believe it. We'd taken so many steps to ensure nobody could possibly get hurt, and then the worst happened. It was little comfort that the policeman's widow eventually filed a gross negligence suit against the police department, because it was our actions that set things in motion. We even set up a trust fund for the policeman's children through a Croatian businessman, but that ended when he passed away, so later, while I was still in prison, I donated money to the fund that I earned doing translations and various other jobs.

Of course in retrospect I know how naïve and ridiculous it was to assume nothing could go wrong. But we were young and idealistic and thought that good intentions were enough. Now I know that things can always go wrong and usually do. And we'll have to live with that knowledge, that guilt, for the rest of our lives.

PB: How did the hijack end?

JB: When I was able to confirm the leaflets had been printed in the major US and world newspapers. As soon as I passed that information back to the plane, the surrender took place and everyone came out.

PB: What were the sentences given by the court?

JB: We went to trial and were found guilty. We actually wanted to go to trial so we could explain our actions, we hoped to be seen as human beings in a desperate situation, not as thugs, criminals, terrorists. The judge, who heard all the witnesses and saw all the evidence, had no choice but to sentence us to a mandatory life in prison for "air piracy resulting in a death". That was the law. But he did have the power to make recommendations about how long he felt we should serve, and he did: Zvonko, ten years total and I, eight years total. In his sentencing statement he emphasised it was not

our intention to harm anyone, that he did not consider us "terrorists or criminals", and that he considered the cause of Croatian independence a "noble one", though he disagreed with our means. He also strongly criticised the then Yugoslav government for trying to influence the outcome of our case, as well as the media for putting out false stories during our trial about Zvonko's involvement in other unsolved cases, which was a terrible injustice.

The trial judge got involved again on several occasions when the Parole Commission failed to follow his recommendations in both of our cases, calling their decision "cruel and unnecessarily harsh". I ultimately served thirteen years, five more than he recommended, and Zvonko is still in prison, 28 years later, which is 15 years longer than the judge's recommendation.

PB: Why has Zvonko not been released yet? What reasons are you being given?

JB: Before Croatia became independent, the Yugoslav government successfully applied pressure on the U.S. State Department, according to the late Evan Kemp, a Reagan and Bush, Sr., appointee, and former EEOC Chairman, who looked into our case in the early 1990s. Afterwards, political reasons completely unconnected to our case were used as justification to deny him parole, which I feel violates the American people's basic sense of fairness. And after September 11, the tendency to equate all cases with the events of that horrible and tragic day has been a further obstacle to his parole. We were prepared to sacrifice our freedom and our youth, and be punished for the actions we committed, but it's profoundly wrong for Zvonko to still be in prison because of something he did not do, because of a "political climate."

'...we'd taken so many steps to ensure nobody could possibly get hurt, and then the worst happened...'

PB: After eight years of prison, Zvonko escaped. What effect did this have on his release?

JB: He did escape, for one day,

almost 20 years ago, to protest the Parole Board's decision to deny me parole and surrendered peacefully that same day. The arresting police officer characterised him as "a very gentle and intelligent man". The judge, Gerard Goettel, gave him a concurrent sentence, stating Zvonko should have already been released if the Parole Board had followed our trial judge's recommendation, and that he didn't "intend to add to the sentence."

PB: Do you still regard hijacking as a legitimate means to promote a cause?

JB: You have to bear in mind that the hijacking took place during revolutionary years, Vietnam, the civil and human rights movement. We were young idealists who thought we should and could change the world. Like most of the



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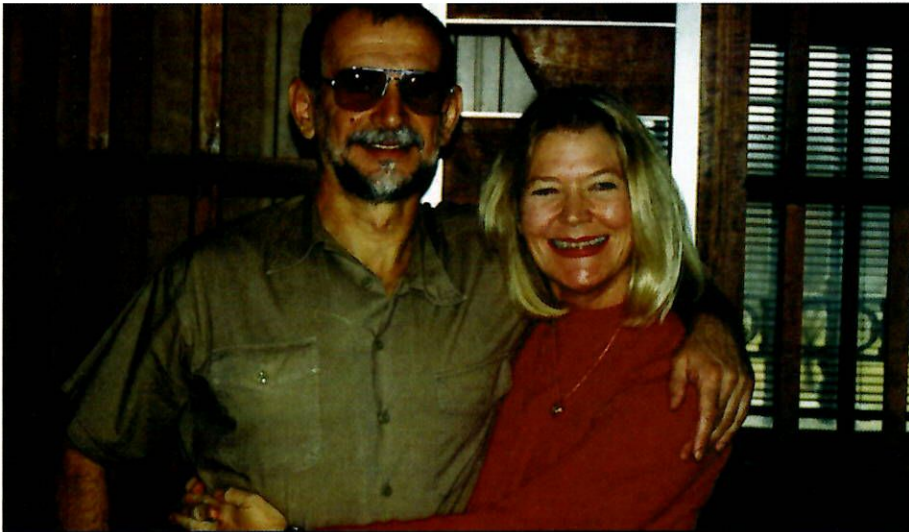
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'...Nobel Prize winner Nelson Mandela openly advocated violence, pointing out that all legal means to fight apartheid had failed. He's now considered a martyr, by many a saint, and is received and honoured by all the leaders of the world...'

rest of our generation. But we never advocated violence, and ironically didn't consider the hijacking to be an act of violence then, since no weapons were on the plane. We were sure the explosives left behind would be detonated safely by the experts, using our instructions.

But it's interesting to consider that back then, Nobel Prize winner Nelson Mandela did openly advocate violence, pointing out that all legal means to fight apartheid had failed. He was ultimately convicted of over 221 acts of "terrorism", which he's never denied. Yet he's now considered a martyr, by many a saint, and is received and honoured by all the leaders of the world. Another Nobel Prize winner, Sean McBride, said the same thing: "if

oppression amounts to genocide, people are entitled to fight back." I believe if state terrorism around the world had been opposed more aggressively back then, there would have been fewer acts of individual terrorism today.

However, on a personal level, I'd never do such a thing again, and neither would Zvonko, because we're older and wiser and know accidents can always happen. We will regret forever the human loss that resulted, however unintentionally, from our acts.

PB: How is Zvonko regarded in Croatia?

JB: After 28 years, most people believe he should be released on

simple humanitarian grounds, and not because they were or are supportive of his actions. Every day, we see war criminals from the Milosevic regime, many of whom were members of the same system we tried to expose back in 1976, being sentenced by the Hague Tribunal to ridiculously low prison terms of five or ten years for genocide and mass murder committed during the Serbian aggression against Croatia and Bosnia in the early 1990s, and they feel it's horribly unfair that Zvonko's still in prison. Many other respected individuals outside Croatia have also urged his humanitarian release, from the honorary President of B'nai B'rith, to the former US ambassador to the Vatican, and others.

PB: What contacts have you had with the passengers and crew of TWA 355 since the hijacking?

JB: Several corresponded with me for years, and some even visited me in prison in California. One, the late Rudy Bretz, even appeared as my representative at the Parole Board hearings in support of my release.

PB: What are your feelings towards the United States today?

JB: I was born and raised in the United States, I travel there every year, and my entire family still lives in the U.S. I love my country, but I still believe a terrible injustice has taken place in Zvonko's case, and hope this injustice will finally be corrected. Americans, regardless of their personal political views, believe in fairness and justice. Zvonko has paid his debt to society and I hope he'll soon be allowed to spend his remaining years with his wife and family, most of whom he's never even seen or met. ■

Julienne Basic's book of memoirs about events prior to and during the hijacking ("Lovers and Madmen") came out in 1995 in Croatian and 2000 in English.