

THE SONG OF LJUBAN JEDNAK (1941/43, 1972, 2026)

Rewritten into English verse by Darko R. Suvin

I am in Glina, small townlet south of Zagreb, I am Ljuban Jednak,
I'm a Serbian peasant, twenty years old on July 28, 1941. I'll now dictate
My memories in liberated Banija^{*/}, two years later, to a comrade partizan
Mladen Iveković, writer from Zagreb.

I fled from Shelovo,
My village, when we heard of mass killings of Serbs in
The newly destroyed Yugoslavia. The king's army
That ruled it twentythree years capitulated to the Nazis
In five days of April, the bloodied piece torn from its body is
Called Independent Croatia and run by the fascist movement
Called Ustashe^{*/}, recruited from our poorest Croat neighbours.
I was caught, beaten a whole night, put into a cattle wagon
With other Serbs, and into this church of the Blessed Virgin, in Glina.

Glina's Ustasha butcher Nikica Vidaković met us with bloodshot eyes.
They locked the door, the church was full, over 600 people, most of us
Hoped we would be sent to forced labour. We were thirsty and hungry.
They took the names of all of us prisoners. In the afternoon, the Ustashe
Came in led by their officer, who shouted "Lie down, take off shoes and coats".
We did, we were cold and hungry and afraid. He called up Pero Miljević:
"What d'you know about insurgent Chetniks?"^{*/} "Nothing." "And are you
A Chetnik bandit, my dove?" "I'm not, not..." "Not a bandit, by your Vlach^{*/} 20.
God! You whoreson! Fuck your mother!" and he rushed at Miljević. They brought
A thick rope from the belfry and laid Pero on the ground. They beat him long,
He was all black and blue. At first he shouted, later he just
Groaned. And then they left.

Other Ustashe arrived later. „Whoever has money,
Hand it over, food will be bought for them.“ People gave happily, about
6000 dinars^{*/} were collected. Everyone was hungry. But no-one brought food.

At dusk, the Ustashe stormed in. Weapons clattered in the half-light,

Jackboots echoed through our church. Light the candles! Flickering
 Shadows moved across the walls. The raiders circled around, with
 Bloodthirsty glares at groups of their victims. Our hearts were
 Pounding, it seemed they could be heard from afar in the silence.
 "Do you believe in our Poglavnik*/*?" roared one Ustasha. „We believe”
 Several voices responded. „Shout >Long live the Poglavnik!<”
 Some were shouting. „Louder, you motherfucking Serbs!
 Louder...” “ Suddenly, a rifle was shooting over our heads.
 „ Lie down!” shouted one executioner. We piled on top
 Of one another on the church floor. „Get up! ... Lie down, get up... lie down...”
 The poor people got up and fell down again... so it went many times.
 Only sighs and laboured breathing could be heard. My heart
 Was pounding. The raiders were smashing things up, they pounded the altar 40.
 With rifle butts, torn off icons fell to the ground. The villains threw at us
 Candle holders and other things, foaming with rage and swearing
 At the top of their voices. We were forced to lie down in shirt
 And underpants. Like madmen they trampled us, beating us with rifle
 Butts and barrels, stamping on us with boots wherever they could.
 A deafening wailing, crying and screaming broke out. "Where is
 Pero Miljević?" Pero spoke up in a weak voice. He was already
 Badly beaten and begged them “don’t hit me”. In the Ustasha's hand
 A knife flashed in the candlelight. Our breath caught. The Ustasha slowly
 Approached Pero and in the blink of an eye drove the knife
 Into his neck. He also slit his stomach open. Pero fell
 Without a word. Blood spurted out, and only gurgling
 Was heard as he died. A general slaughter now broke out.
 "Kill, kill..." the raiders shouted, slaughtering whoever they could
 Get to. Other Ustashe were beating heads of the wounded with rifle
 Butts. And so it went on and on...

It can't be described, i must pause,
 It's as if I'm now watching people kneel and beg to be spared, but
 One deep stab to the neck and a twist to the left... and it's over. The victim
 Still tries to get up, but a blow to the head with rifle butt
 Finishes off the butchery. Some struggle, raise their hands in defence, 60.

Others wait like sheep. For one, the knife blow landed instead of neck
 On his face, for another, on his arm. One ran, but an Ustasha
 Chased after him and knifed him before he'd got to the wall...
 Brain matter splattered, blood gurgled across the stony church floor
 And slowly flowed in a wide stream towards the church doors.
 The deafening screams gradually subsided, but the killing of helpless
 People went on for an eternity. Groans from the heap lying in blood
 Could be heard. Not all of them were dead yet.

I watched the scene cowering against the wall. In the corner behind a cupboard
 It was dark. I crept behind the little cupboard, waiting for the Ustashe
 To finish their job. Silence gradually took over the church. The victims
 Lay scattered throughout the chamber. Every now and then, a leg or an arm
 Twitched, groaning could still be heard from somewhere. The Ustashe
 Were resting, they wiped bloody knives and rifle butts. Some
 Went outside in front of the church.

At one point, when everything
 Had quietened down and the raiders gathered before the door,
 I leapt silently from my hiding place and threw myself among
 The slaughtered, into a pool of still warm blood.

So I lay there

In a pool of blood among the murdered Serbs, waiting for my fate.
 The Ustashe are talking about the job well done, boasting and laughing. 80.
 Suddenly, a young man lying beside me lifts his bloody head
 And groans: "It's not over, you sons of bitches!" Swearing, an Ustasha
 Rushed over and killed him. And now the scoundrels realised
 That others among us might still be alive, so they began to beat
 The dead victims in turn with the rifle butts and stab them. I got several blows
 But I made no move. One of the murderers was stabbing people one by one.
 He moved towards me, he knifed the body beside me, then knelt on my back
 And drove the knife into the next person... He passed me by... All the time,
 I never lost the conviction I would be saved. Perhaps that certainty saved me...

Then they began to drag corpses out of the church and throw them

Into the lorry. They got hold of me too. They dragged me by my legs
 Across the stony floor. On the steps my head was banging against
 Stone, but I endured this without giving signs of life. They threw me onto a lorry
 Almost full of corpses. I lay on my back. The Ustashe were still piling victims
 On. It was already late at night. I lay in wait for a chance to escape, but
 It never came. Laying on my back, I then experienced an even more
 Dreadful thing: a dead corpse was laid on top of me, and his
 Slit throat covered my mouth...

(Ljuban stopped; he looked at me and smiled
 Awkwardly, adds the scribe.)

I couldn't believe a body could survive
 Such horrors in such a short space of time... We weren't driven far. Soon 100.
 I felt the lorry driving over uneven ground. I heard an order:
 "Drive closer to the pit!" There, other butchers were waiting, at work
 Even at the pit. The large pit was already half full of corpses. They threw us
 From the lorry into the pit. The Ustashe were stacking the corpses
 Like firewood. I was grabbed by arms and legs, swung a few times
 And thrown into the pit. I fell onto something soft, on the corpses.
 They dragged me a little further, laid me on a given spot.
 I was lucky, I found myself on top again. I lay there
 For an eternity. Lorries kept arriving, bringing still alive Serbs. At the edge
 Of the pit, they were beaten on the head with axes and hammers, and
 Thrown in. There wasn't much screaming or crying out. In the night silence
 The sounds heard most were axe blows, some muffled moans and Ustasha curses.
 Bloodied bodies fell silently into the pit. They brought a young woman,
 I think she was a teacher from Bović. They raped her there, by the pit,
 And then shot her with a carbine...

Late at night the bloody work was done.

Some of the butchers were still jumping into the pit, walking over the corpses
 To search for rings and other valuables. One of them spotted my T-shirt.
 He began to pull and twist it to get it off me. He fumed, struggled, and finally
 Got it off. Nobody noticed I was alive.

I felt even colder, I was shivering. I was afraid the Ustashe 120.
 Would notice it. Above the pit, they were watching their victims. Some

Victims were still moving. Carbines and revolvers cracked out.

That's when I was wounded in the leg...

And at last, everything quietened down.

The butchers gathered some distance from the pit around a lantern, talking about Their exploits. Almost total darkness reigned in the pit and around it. I was preparing To escape. ... I didn't know where I was; I wandered around at random, in need To get as far away from the pit as possible...

I hid with my uncle, Pavle Lončar,

Where I lived for six months. I am the only one who survived from that pit.

Note on source: Djuro Zatezalo, *Radio sam svoj seljački i kovački posao (I Did My Peasant and Blacksmith Work – Testimonies of Genocide)*. SKPD Prosvjeta, Zagreb 2005. I took it from <https://jadovno.com/kalendar-genocida-28-jul-1941-svjedocenje-ljuban-jednak-seliste-glina/> (Calendar of Genocide: 28 July 1941 – Testimony: Ljuban Jednak, Šelovo, Glina district). Zatezalo -- I assume his is the voice in lines 98-99 -- adds: „This testimony was recorded by Mladen Iveković as early as 1943, while passing through the liberated Banija. I only supplemented it with a few minor details in 1972, during a conversation with Ljuban Jednak in his house in Glina.“ The earliest printed source is in Mladen Iveković, *Nepokorena zemlja*, Zagreb 1946. My warm thanx for comments and sending me that book go to Rada Iveković, also Boris Buden.

In my title I add to the recording dates 1943 and 1972 the year of translation. Another date should also be known: in 1995, Ljuban Jednak, by then age 74, and 200,000 other Serbs fled the Croatian army's "Operation Tempest (Oluja)", organised by the US army and CIA to reconquer the dissident Serbian semi-State of Krajina. Jednak died a few years later in Serbia.

For ignorant Anglophones: in his surname the vowels are pronounced as in "led mark", thus "Yédnahk"; in the name, Lj is a single consonant, a soft "l", thus "Lyùhbahn."

Glossary

*/ line 3: Banija is the traditional name a small region south of Zagreb up to the northwestern limits of Bosnia. It was a part of the frontier between the Austrian and Turkish empires for 350 years, and early on settled by Serbs fleeing Turkish rule, who were reorganised by Austrians into a "Military March" governed directly by the Austrian army, abolished in 1881.

*/ line 10: The Ustashe (singular Ustasha), archaic Croatian for "rebels", were a small right-wing group of Croat ultra-nationalists turned fascist, who particularly hated Serbs and Jews for sullyng national purity. Sponsored by Mussolini, they specialised in political bombings and murder, including collaboration in the assassination of King Alexander in 1931, and were installed in power under German and Italian fascist occupation from 1941 and 1945.

*/ line 19: The “Chetnik bandits” referred to were the first stirrings of resistance in that region, begun by Serbs fled from villages into the mountains. The name was used in Serbia since the 19th century for irregular combatants in guerrilla warfare and reused in World War 2 for Serbian Monarchist groups. Other resistance groups were multinational, organised by communists and called Partizans, but it’s doubtful this was clear to the Ustashe in July 1941.

*/ line 20: “Vlakh” (Serbocroatian “Vlah”, adjective “Vlashki”), properly an ethnic group in central Balkans in the Middle Ages, speaking an idiom derived from late Roman Empire Latin, often nomadic. Since they were poor and easily marginalised, the adjective was used in many regions for vilification, and in particular by Croatian chauvinists and racists as an abusive swearword for Serbs.

*/ line 26: The dinar was the official currency in Yugoslavia and is still used in Serbia. I remember that one egg in the inflationary 1941 situation could in Zagreb outrageously cost 1 dinar, but I couldn’t find comparative data. The official money in fascist Croatia, called a “kuna” (weasel), was just being introduced in the days of the Glina massacre.

*/ line 32: “Poglavnik” was an Ustashe neologism for Headman coined to convey the Italian *Duce* or German *Führer* into Croatian. His name was Ante Pavelić.

Translator's note: I tried hard to keep to Jednak's syntax and close to his vocabulary. I added only a few verses at the beginning incorporating data needed for background, mostly extrapolated from him. I find his voice unschooled but often terse and poetic.