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#### 1- THE RETREAT

I worked in the General Staff until the fall of Vedeno. After the retreat from Grozny we were given the order to find a safe haven for the General Staff and the Intelligence unit. It had to be located far away from populated areas and well protected from air raids. After searching for some time we found a place near Elistanzhi - it was a beautiful place but not suitable as events would show. When the Russians appeared unexpectedly in Makhketi from Ulus Kert [May 1995] we had to retreat rapidly and abandon Elistanzhi. This was the time when the Russians were attacking in the South in every direction. The Commander-in-Chief was retreating from Vedeno and Dargo.

We ended up in Benoy. Our HQ was in a Niva car. Benoy is set on a hill. The Russians were firing from Vedeno with T-80 tanks. They were firing mainly at night, probably for psychological reasons. The people of Benoy were scared. At first they had asked us to leave but then let us stay when they understood that we had nowhere else to go. During retreat we tried not to stay in the villages but at that time we had no alternatives.

We began scouting the forests and the mountains to set up new bases and the HQ, and for hiding reserves of food and weapons. We were preparing for a lengthy partisan war. We even set up cavalry units to explore the mountains, look for grottoes. We would not have starved in the mountains. There were enough people, shepherds, and game to help us to survive. It would have been difficult to move around in the mountains in daytime but at night the Russians could not prevent it. If it wasn't for Budenovsk we would have had to resort to these 19th century tactics. Soon there would have been no villages and towns left willing to allow us to operate from their territory.

It was a period of chaos. The front was divided in two - Vedeno and Shatoy. There were rumours that Russian commandos had been air dropped in the mountains and that they had closed the passage along the mountain ridge from one side of Chechnya to the other. We did not know where our commanders were. Maskhadov had disappeared, Shamil Basaev and the other commanders also. Our forces had disbanded. Behind us was a 3 km wide forest and further the mountains and the canyons. These were the only places left to hide. It was quite dangerous. Russians dropped depth bombs in mountain canyons. It was uncomfortable - you become deaf for several weeks.

We could not see the way ahead and thought it was the end. We decided to disperse to fight individually. Each man is allowed to choose the place where he will fight his last battle and die. I had brothers in Shatoy, so I decided to go there. (Most of the men in my unit also decided to go in the direction of Shatoy - most of them came from the Shatoy district and some from the Nadterechnyi raion. It was easy for them to get back to Nadterechnyi through the mountains of Shatoy.) We were ready for any wild actions and sacrifice. We discussed various possibilities. If we were unable to die for whatever reason - lack of ammunitions for instance - we decided to hid in the mountains to avoid capture. We understood that military resistance would be difficult in the mountains. We considered crossing the border through the mountains to continue the struggle from the neighbouring republics. Two of our older comrades had already gone to Daghestan. They were going to organise refugee papers. Another alternative was to cross through Zandak and to return to Grozny from Daghestan with new papers or organise resistance from Daghestan. Our group was probably not the only one to think along those lines.

With the mood of desperation we were in it was not surprising that the raid on Budennovsk happened. Budennovsk was probably the only operation which was prepared in complete secrecy. All other operations, as far as I know, like the attacks on Grozny, were known in advance and talked about in the bazars. With Pervomaiskaia, there was no need to advertise it - the whole world had forward knowledge. But Budennovsk was different.

It was a breakthrough in the war. It raised our spirits. Until then we had retreated everywhere. It was impossible to cross the frontline because we did not know the situation behind Russian lines. Budennovsk gave us the possibility to break through and reach behind Russian lines. Our confidence grew, we started making forays in the lowlands and found it easy - easier than fighting in the highlands, struggling up mountain slopes pulling our guns. Among the enemy, in civilian clothes, it is very easy to fight. Of course we felt bad about those who fought on the frontline - there you were, clean shaved and in civilian kit while others were in the trenches. But despite the ease, our opportunities were limited - one had to be on the look-out for opportunities - not for the enemy, but for the right moment to start an action.

## 2- THE COMEBACK - THE WORK IN GROZNY

### Intelligence gathering

After Budennovsk, I was sent to Grozny by Maskhadov to set up an intelligence network. I was answerable to the General Staff. I had to gather information on Russian positions in preparation for the March 1996 attack against Grozny, although I did not know what was planned at the time. I guessed that something special was brewing but it was only with hindsight that I understood much of the purpose of my work. I had to collect information on the Russians' exact positions, their numbers, the routes in and out of Grozny, the possible ways of bringing weapons into the town, but I had few concrete instructions from HQ. My brief was broad - to gather information everywhere.

I began on my own. I had no team. I started by using friends and relatives. I had no way of paying them and no money to pay for information. At first I tried to be casual and did not tell them the real purpose of my inquiries. Throughout the remainder of the war, my helpers were all volunteers. I had a map of Grozny and its surroundings. I began by travelling to the districts where the Russians had their bases and garrisons. I checked the people I knew in the area - usually 5/6 people, and recruited them.

The first task was to find the best route to reach the Russian bases. We had no training in intelligence work - to find out the number of Russian troops and equipment was pure improvisation at first. Each one tried his own manner. I often used young women. When I traveled to report to HQ with documents, I always took a young woman with me. (She was very brave and survived the war.) It was a safeguard.

To gather information around the capital, we had to walk. We explored routes through woods and forests on foot - between Grozny and Urus Martan, the piedmont and the escape routes to the southern mountains. Sometimes we walked as far as the positions of our units in the pre-Alps. After we had explored a district and verified that passage for our units was possible, we selected some local people to watch and report any changes - for example a change in the position of a road block, any movement of troops and weaponry, any unusual movement or development. Once checked, these areas came under constant surveillance. We knew that we had to update our information all the time.

One of our best source of information was the market. People in the market were in touch with traders who themselves were in contact with all the principal Russian garrisons. These garrisons usually had small markets nearby which provided them with goods, alcohol, narcotics and so on. The traders had their "favourite" clients among the Russian soldiers who had plenty of money stolen during clean-up operations. They chatted with the traders who, naturally, got information. When we were organising a special operation it was essential that we knew when a Russian column would be on the move. That was when the traders were useful.

Of course between the time we gathered the information and the March 1996 operation, changes inevitably occurred. Mumadi Saidaev grumbled afterwards that some of our numbers were not accurate. But we had no possibility to update information every day. Passing on information was not easy. Our radio communication was poor because priority was given to military operations. Our radio did not reach all the mountain regions. We had to get to the highest houses in Grozny to communicate. We would waste 2 or 3 hours to get the HQ. When we got it,

communications would often be cut off. More often than not, we had to report in person, with all our notes.

Our asset was that we were able to melt among the civilian population. The phenomenon of dedovshchina in the Russian army helped us greatly in our intelligence gathering. As a rule, we did not bother with small posts of 20/30 men. They became useless as soon as they were isolated among Chechens. But we always watched the larger garrisons, watching for Russian soldiers wandering out through the mine fields surrounding them. We caught the soldiers. They gave us information on their bases, their numbers, weaponry, reserves of ammunitions, relations between officers and troops, and so on.

The greatest difficulties we faced was travel because of the constant identity checks by military road blocks. The Russians had lists of people to be detained. Nobody was safe from these checks - having the same name as somebody on these lists would put you in danger. We tried to avoid crossing the checkpoints. In the city all the danger spots could be bypassed with the exception of the Sunja crossing, although on foot you could even cross the Sunja. When transport had to be used it became more dangerous. We avoided using private cars and taxis and used public buses instead. One knew that in case of difficulty the chances were that people in the bus would help and one could escape. When you were in a bus surrounded by women you felt more secure. If you were stopped at a checkpoint the women would start a row and prevent your arrest.

#### "Special" operations

Besides information gathering, we had other tasks: supplying the HQ with ammunitions, mines and finance, and harassing Russian bases in Grozny. The HQ had other groups working on supplies, mine was not the only one. The best sources of weapons and ammunitions were the areas where fighting was going on. But as a rule every Russian base or checkpoint was ready to trade, sell ammunitions, grenades, mines, even anti-tank weapons, mukhi, Shmels. As we had no money, we bartered weapons and ammunitions for drugs (anasha) and alcohol.

We avoided attacking larger garrisons because there was no point in it - they would immediately begin destroying every houses around. We attacked the small komendatory, for example near Katayama, Staropromyslovskaia. Not to captured but to harass them. When night fell, the town became ours.

There were many cases when we captured Russian officers in the market, in the centre of town, next to the FSB building. It was easy to get them out of Grozny - the local militia helped us. They accompanied us with their armed cars when we had to get people out of town.

To find money for our armed forces, we organised hold-ups of Russian and pro-Russians organisations, banks etc. I remember one hold-up when we had to cross several Russian posts to escape to another part of town. The operation took place within 100 metres from a Russian post. We were in Russian uniforms in an Uazik and we had to get away quickly before information spread. We had to cross a narrow bridge watched by a Russian post with an APC, the road was very bad and it was impossible to drive rapidly. When we approached, a passenger bus broke down on the bridge and a lorry was trying to bypass it. We had to wait and were a little nervous - not all of us spoke good Russian, it could be dangerous if the soldiers decided to talk to us. The only thing to do was to get out of the car and insult the lorry driver in filthy language as a Russian would do. This speeded up everything and we got away without problems. We hid the car later in an empty courtyard as we did not need it any longer.

Transport for the hold-up operations was not a problem. When we needed transport we stopped any suitable government car on the road, told the driver that we needed his car. We hid the car for a couple of days to check that there were no searches. If all was well would use this car for an operation. After the work was done we got rid of the cars but if they were in good condition we send them to the General Staff.

Dressed in Russian uniforms we were able to drive around town in broad daylight across Russian posts. The Russians could not identify us as Chechens because they had many foreigners serving in their ranks - Tatars, Daghestanis, North Caucasians. It was not your looks which

mattered but your attitude. If you were not confident it was better to avoid going through a Russian post.

There were other special groups operating in Grozny. They mined the roads, hunted for Russian officers and vehicles. Communications with them were difficult because they were small groups - 4 to 5 people, never more than 10. These men had no specific bases, they lived at home, kept their weapons at home or near by despite the danger. We had no radio communications with them, we just met from time to time.

Grozny- March 1996

The March operation was kept reasonably secret, which was surprising, because it was difficult to keep a secret among Chechens. As a whole, it came as a surprise although people were expecting something of the kind. I was ordered to leave Grozny just as our armed units were entering town. I watched the fighting in the early morning, around 6 pm most positions were occupied. All Russian posts were surrounded and immobilised, but our forces did not have the order to storm them. Blocking them was enough. Those Russian groups that were caught along the routes of our units were destroyed. We heard their calls on the radio asking for help, they could not understand what was happening, who were the attackers, where they had come from. There was a good panic.

The Russian garrison in our district tried a sortie to go to the aid of the Komendatura but we met them. There was a good fight and we burned most of their equipment. But we could not fight for long because of lack of ammunitions, and they managed to move back to their base with one APC. After that they made no further attempt and buried themselves quietly in their base. After 3 days our units withdrew. The Russians waited one week before moving back in.

Before the March 1996 attack on Grozny, the Russians made no effort to patrol Grozny or scout a route before troops movement. Afterwards they became more alert, especially as our units had intensified their sabotage activity in Spring 1996 - mainly exploding Russian staff cars and APCs. They closed streets and crossroads, had snipers at every corners. In the morning, around 6/7 am, they would bring their units

out of their bases, together with engineers in 2 or 3 APCs, to check the roads. When they began patrolling we had to find new methods.

I am not an expert on mines but I know that we started using mines, which exploded with daylight. The mines were laid, covered with rubber and earth. After dogs had sniffed the mines the engineers would uncover them and they would explode. We also used pipes filled with nails and other stuff. We tied them to posters to hit the APCs from above. It had a strong demoralising effect on the Russians and they would avoid clean-up operations in areas where explosions had occurred. However, they often did spot checks in the raion of Berezka where there is a market, and generally around the main garrisons. At night they fired at random around the garrisons.

The Russian tactics

Grozny was packed with soldiers, they were everywhere. Even I, who went around photographing and checking Russian posts, did not realise at first how many they were. But they had a major problem - lack of co-ordination and collaboration. This made our work easier, and as a whole we had no major problems.

a- the kontrakniki

The role of the kontrakniks was disruptive. It was not surprising - when you throw together hardened 30/40 years old with boy conscripts, the result could only be negative. The kontrakniki bullied the soldiers and did not do any work themselves. The soldiers were always under stress or tired and when they went on duty they tried to hide and sleep. There were many runaway soldiers. Often when they tried to escape the persecutions of the kontrakniki, they fell in our hands. Drunkenness and drug addiction were rife among soldiers, mainly due to the trafficking of the kontrakniki. We passed the runaway soldiers from one family to another and tried to contact the Mothers' Committee. There were many mothers in Grozny looking for their sons. We had little use for these soldiers. They were young and knew very little. All we could get from them was information on the units where they served. Often we gave them civilian clothes and tried to send them back home. If they fell in the hands of our fighting units, the situation was

different - they were considered POWs, but in Grozny we did not need extra mouths to feed.

b- the clean-up operations (zachistka)

We always knew where and when a zachistka would take place because the Russians used Chechen militia. The militia warned us - even the collaborators had family members on our side. When a place was surrounded we had to have an escape route. When I got information about clean-up operations - even if the information was unconfirmed - I immediately passed it on to other groups who in turn warned others. We used radios when we could or send couriers.

These operations were predictable: the Russians started at one end of a district and moved along the main street, only glancing into the courtyards. They seldom managed to encircle an entire district completely and to prevent people from moving out. There were many exits. Usually it was enough for those who had to hide to disappear through a back road while the Russian were checking the main street.

Once we had a clean-up operation in our borough (poselok). We simply moved to the other side of the main road and watched the soldiers. We did not even need to take cover. We did not generally keep a large amount of weapons. The groups working in Grozny had no more than 5 or 6 grenade launchers, some mortars and ammunitions. Sometimes the Russians used metal detectors in the houses but only an idiot would keep his weapons at home. There were plenty of places where we could bury our weapons. Light weapons, rifles, we hid close to our houses. With advance warning we had plenty of time to move them.

There were very few cases that I remember when a house was stormed. This only happened after a denunciation. It was very rare for the Russian population to make denunciations because they were too scared - it was easy to find out where denunciations came from during a zachistka,. The informers were local Chechens, either committed opponents of the resistance who through conversations with relatives would hear something. The most frequent cases were when our supporters inadvertently let information slip in front of a relative in the militia. There were also cases when people used denunciations to settle

personal scores with the result that innocent people were arrested. But generally zachistka had no organised character, no specific aim. We had the impression that the clean-up operations were just a manner of "fulfilling the plan", not so much to scare the population of Grozny as to reassure Russian troops themselves, and for propaganda purpose.

c- the use of Shmel

When we retreated from Grozny, the Russians cleared the cellars with Shmel and grenades, systematically, to avoid risking their soldiers' lives. But the systematic rounding up of the population and its massacre using Shmel, as it happened in Samashki, was as far as I know an exception. In the rural areas, heavy air and artillery bombings were most commonly used against small villages, often for no logical reason, and in territory supposedly already controlled by the Russians. They also used depth bombs on mountain villages, I could never understand why, to frighten the civilians, kill the herds?

We also used Shmel in Grozny for our special operations - it is an exceptionally good weapon for urban fighting, for destroying a Russian post or a sniper position - one shot at a window and it was enough.

To sum up our tactics: there was no question of holding positions, of fighting for every inch of territory as during WW2. This is probably a tactic of the past. In Chechnya it did not apply. When we build defensive positions and trenches in the countryside, we were always closed to a village which could become the target of Russian

retaliatory fire. If this happened we had to leave, they were our

people, we could not subject them to certain reprisals.