

How it all began...

André Franquin!... What did this genius of comics, the creator of Gaston and Marsupilami, have to do with “The Partisans”?!?... A lot! In the mid-seventies I was in my early twenties and already considered myself to be a ‘veteran’ in the comics business, because in 1971, I launched and edited the comics magazine *Strip Art* which was distributed nationwide in ex-Yugoslavia. So, I was already attending Lucca Comics and many other manifestations, including the Angoulême BD festival, where I was the member of the international jury from the Year One.

So, I quickly became friends with many artists, and was a very close friend with André Franquin. Each time I visited my friend and artist Hermann in Brussels – which was several times a year – André would invite me to a lunch or dinner in his favorite restaurant, and he once said he would never forgive me if I ever came to Brussels without seeing him.

And it was André Franquin who introduced me to Martin Lodewijk, Dutch comics’ icon, the creator of “Agent 327”, writer of “Storm” and a number of other series. And it was just at the time when Martin and Frits van der Heide were preparing a new weekly comics magazine called *Eppo* to be published by Oberon, which was part of the Dutch company V.N.U., one of the largest publishing conglomerates in Europe at that time.

This book is the first one of three integral volumes of “The Partisans”. In dossiers which we will publish in the 2nd and 3rd volumes there will be a number of articles, photos, drawings and information about Jules, the artist, also with references to his many other works. But here, in the first dossier, I want to focus on how it all began with “The Partisans”. There was an article with a similar title, which I wrote and published in the ex-Yugoslav family magazine *Svijet* (The World), which has been published by *Oslobođenje* in Sarajevo. That article, which appeared in the issue of *Svijet* dated July 7th, 1978 (I was doing my army service at that time), helped me now a lot in refreshing my memory. Namely, I totally forgot that “The Partisans” were first published in ex-Yugoslavia every week on the last page of *Svijet*, and only after that I published complete episodes in *Strip Art*.

It has been forty years now since Martin Lodewijk



Jules visiting Ervin in Sarajevo in early 1970's
(photo by Zdenka Radilović)

called and asked me: “Frits and I are preparing a new weekly comics magazine *Eppo*. Can you produce for us a comic strip series about actions of the Yugoslav partisans in the World War Two?” My instant answer, as always in such situations, was: “Of course I can!” Then Martin suggested that he visit me in Sarajevo the following week. But, as he had to fly via Belgrade, and since the wait at the Belgrade airport for a connecting flight to Sarajevo was too long, I suggested that we meet in Belgrade instead. So, I booked for us rooms at the “Kasina” hotel in Belgrade, and we met there the following week.

For the new edition of my book “Professional Secrets of Comics”, which I published in 2011, for the 40th anniversary of SAF (*Strip Art Features*), Martin wrote an article, where he also remembered our meeting in Belgrade:

“So I phoned and took a plane to Belgrade to meet with Ervin. Those were the days. I was naïve enough

to have bought a book about Tito just to familiarize myself with the subject. When we sat in a restaurant (it was restaurant Šumatovac - E.R.) and I showed it proudly to Ervin, he told me sternly to put it away deep in my bag!! Since then we stayed very close and Ervin taught me a lot about the business. And now he asks me to write something about myself and my way of working for his book. Oh, by the way, Jules did a series for Eppo called ‘The Partisans’ that was quite successful. I was very interested in having a series set in that locale, as part of my family comes from that part of the world. My grandfather was born on the Greek island of Cephalonia. Yes, the island of Captain Corelli.”

Until very late that night Martin and I were discussing and brainstorming ideas on how the new series should look like. We disagreed in a number of aspects, and that night we could not come up with an idea that would be satisfying for both of us. But, we agreed on one thing: the main character should be an allied officer, so that we can later on – if the series becomes popular – change locations and move the stories to Greece, Africa or France, in order to refresh the series by using interesting exteriors.



Martin Lodewijk in his studio in Dordrecht in 1981. On top of the wall is framed original of The Partisans – page 18 from ‘Sector F-4’ – dedicated to Martin by Jules (photo by Ervin Rustemagić)

Julio Radilović, known as ‘Jules’, the artist from Zagreb, was my favorite artist in ex-Yugoslavia. So, I published a number of his comics in Strip Art, and my company SAF has been handling sales of all of his works on a world-wide basis. I introduced Martin to Jules’ works before we met in Belgrade, and we both agreed that Jules would be a perfect choice for an artist for the new series we were talking about. Still, Fritz van der Heide insisted that Jules should first do two test pages involving partisans, so that they can see how he would handle the subject. So, Jules did those two test pages, which made everybody happy in the Dutch editorial office.



A scene from one of test pages Jules did at Oberon’s request

My biggest problem, however, was finding a script writer who could write the scripts which would be on the same quality level as Jules’ wonderful art. I didn’t have anybody in mind, but since Jules did most of his comics based on the scripts of Zvonimir Furtinger, and since I was occasionally seeing Furtinger while I was visiting Jules in Zagreb, I decided to give it a try with Furtinger’s script. Consequently, Jules did the whole 22-page episode with him, which was titled “The Traitor”. Unfortunately, the story didn’t turn out well, and I thought it was one of the most uninteresting scripts that Furtinger ever wrote. He obviously didn’t like the subject. The Dutch publisher thought the same, and they paid the price for the whole work, but decided not to publish “The Traitor”.

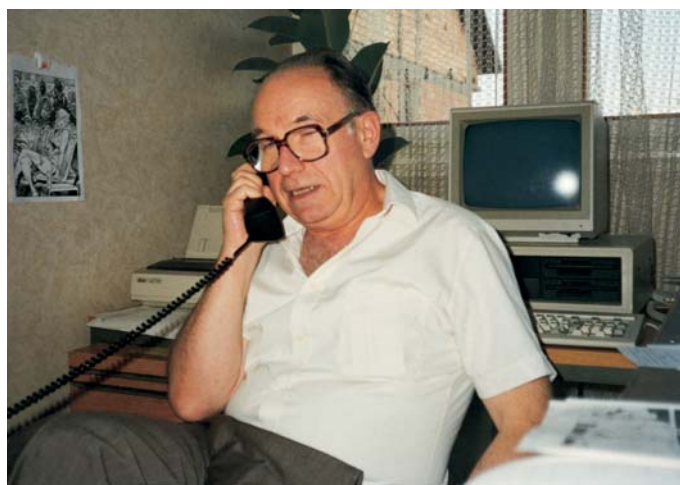
So, I found myself again in the search for a script writer who could handle the work at a very high level. And, then, I met for a coffee with my friend Hajrudin Krvavac, known as ‘Šiba’, who was one of the best and most respected movie directors in ex-Yugoslavia. We sat in then famous Caffè Park in the center of Sarajevo, and I was telling him about the problems I was having in finding a script writer. Then Šiba suggested: “Why don’t you try it with my writer Đorđe Lebović?”. I was in a little shock: Why had I never thought of him myself?!? Probably because Lebović never worked in comics, and I couldn’t imagine the most famous movie, TV and theater writer working in comics. Šiba promised to call Lebović in Belgrade that same evening, and to ask him if he was interested in discussing the project with me.

Luckily, Lebović was interested, but he told me he was very busy at the moment, and could not devote much time to it. So, he suggested that he could turn his existing movie script “Convoy to El Shatt” into our first story. Due to the budgeting problems this movie project was put on hold. I was probably so much impressed that Lebović agreed, that I said “yes” right away, without thinking it through. The man already had behind him such a big slate of successful movies, TV series and theater plays, that I could not think of anyone else in ex-Yugoslavia who could be a better choice. “Walter Defends Sarajevo”, the war movie that Lebović wrote and Šiba directed, was distributed in 60 countries and achieved its greatest success in China, becoming the country’s most popular foreign film of all time. After so many years they are still showing “Walter” on the Chinese television.



Chinese poster for the movie “Walter Defends Sarajevo”

Lebović’s contribution to “The Partisans”, and the characters he created, were of an immense importance for the success of this series, as well as Jules’ artwork, which has been studied to the meticulous details. I still think that each of “The Partisans” episodes that Lebović wrote could be turned into a movie, or at least into a TV episode.



Đorđe Lebović in SAF’s Sarajevo office in 1987
(photo by Ervin Rustemagić)

But, although Lebović was a true professional, he had too many commitments at that time, and couldn’t really write as many episodes of “The Partisans” as I asked him to do. So, in order to avoid too long gaps in publishing of the series, Jules himself suggested Marcel Čukli, his colleague in Zagreb, to write one episode, which Čukli successfully did. And then, again, after Lebović wrote his next episode “The Kidnapping”, he informed me that he was engaged in a big TV project and would not be able to do a new episode of “The Partisans” for the next 5-6 months. So, I had to jump in myself, and I wrote one episode.

And now, so many years later, I am wondering if there would have been “The Partisans” at all if I was not a friend with André Franquin at that time? Probably not! Rest in peace, my dear friend...

Ervin Rustemagić

Celje, April 8, 2015



André Franquin and Ervin in Master’s studio in Bruxelles,
June 5, 1981 (photo by Edina Rustemagić)