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The last flight from Yugoslavia: the story of Toni Mrlak

- ▶ The Slovenian pilot of the Yugoslav army was shot down by his countrymen in the first fights of the war 30 years ago
- ▶ The pilot's family tells RNE how they continue to work to restore his memory, which is still uncomfortable for Ljubljana

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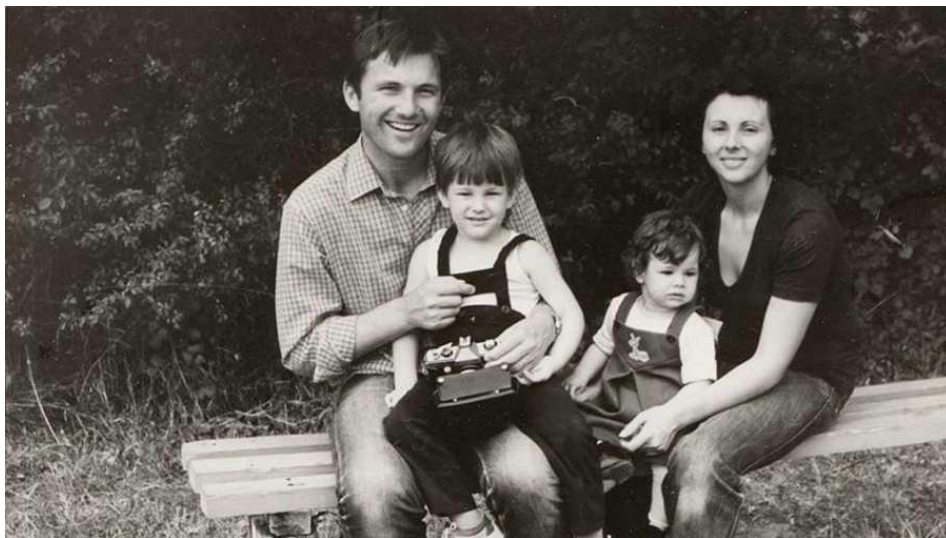
RNE's mornings with Íñigo Alfonso - The last flight from Yugoslavia: the story of Toni Mrlak

IPO DE LECTURA:  6 min.



naz Mrlak is 13 years old when his father is
ed on the first day of all the wars in Yugoslavia ,
 ie 27, 1991. "Four days earlier I slept with him on
 the airfield," he recalls to [RNE](#) 30 years later. "My
 birthday was months away, but he gave me a gift: a

saw him again . His father, Toni Mrlak, takes off his helicopter for the last time 48 hours after Slovenia's declaration of independence . Territorial forces take control of the country and the Yugoslavian army mobilizes to regain it. Toni Mrlak is captain of the first class in the Yugoslav ranks and is ordered to leave Ljubljana to transport bread to the troops surrounded by the Slovenian militia at Vrhnika, in his village, a five-minute flight from the capital. At that time in the afternoon, the open conflict between the two sides has not yet broken out. Mrlak flies low over the city convinced that no one is going to shoot his aircraft. The soldier who finally pulls the trigger may not know that the pilot, like him, is also Slovenian; perhaps he does not know that Mrlak is about to defect to join his own cause. **At the controls of the downed Gazelle there is no aggressor from Belgrade, but one more civilian from Slovenia.**



Toni and Emilija with their children, Tomaz and Breda

national narrative has mythologized his father's fratricide as a heroic act. Ljubljana described Mrlak as a threat, as a traitor. **After the war, his grave was desecrated.** They found excrement in the mailbox of the family home. They received threatening calls in the early morning hours. **The widow, Emilija, was denied a pension to support her children**, Tomaz and Breda, two years younger than her brother.

Both suffered bullying at school. " **When the conflict ended, our battle to restore memory began,**" explains who today flies as a captain in the Slovenian air forces. Tomaz is a pilot, like his father and grandfather.

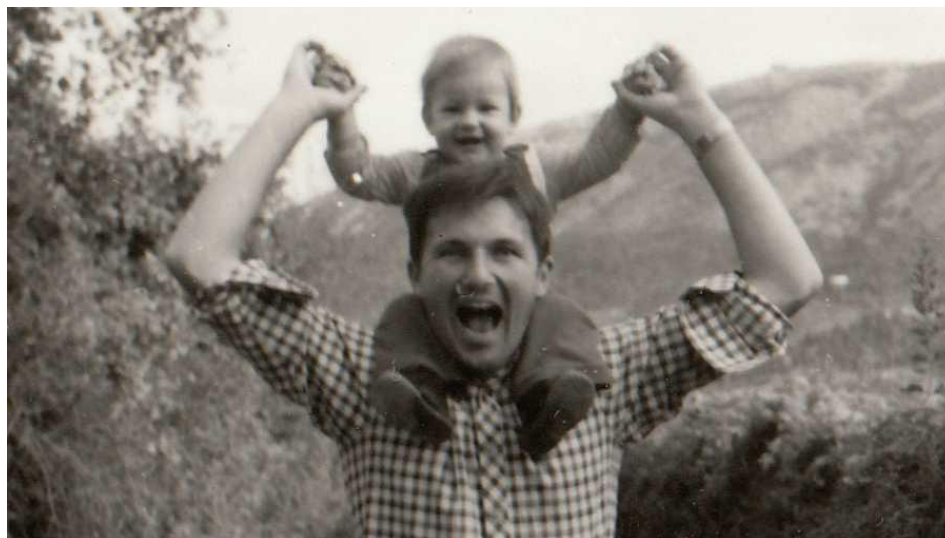
|| **The family continues to regret that the Slovenian national story has mythologized their father's fratricide as a heroic act** ||

The Greek tragedy

"Toni is the hero of a Greek tragedy," sums up Emilija's sister, Draga Potoncjak, who has investigated the death of her brother-in-law for seven years. "His hair began to turn gray six months before he was killed, when he began to contact the Slovenian authorities to plan his departure from the Yugoslavian army." Tomaz, still a teenager, also

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when he would have to decide between two options, that we would all have to do it," he recalls.



Toni and Tomaz Mrlak / ON LOAN FROM MRLAK FAMILY

Toni Mrlak had been coordinating a plan to transfer his aircraft to the Slovenian side for half a year and was waiting for the right moment to do so. There was a truck waiting for two days next to Vrhnik, where the pilot was heading on his last flight, ready to fold the helicopter's propellers, hide it, and hand it over to the territorial forces. Draga insists that Ljubljana was always aware of everything and reproaches the current state of Slovenia for **refusing to recognize the demolition as a mistake**.

The *Gazelle* was attacked for political purposes, according to the Slovenian journalist and writer Matej Surc. "They fired at him to show that they were capable of

|| Toni Mrlak was a victim of the propaganda war ||

propaganda that he is that the photo family also believes. The defense minister during the war, Janez Jansa, the current head of the Slovenian Executive, has admitted on several occasions that they were looking for a psychological blow, a visible victory to boost morale. "They needed to shoot down an aircraft or set a tank on fire. **I know there is no good war, but my father died for nothing,**" continues Tomaz.



Gazelle shot down in Ljubljana on June 27, 1991 / LEND BY MRLAK FAMILY

There may be errors

The two Slovenian justice investigations during the 1990s concluded without inquiring into who shot Toni Mrlak, and why. Ljubljana refused for almost a decade to recognize Emilija as a victim. Already in 2000, the widow told on television the suffering her family was enduring. So yes, the government granted him the pension after a few hours. The

claiming that it was a legitimate target. **The courts dismissed the petition twice, in 2014 and 2016.**

A redress arrived on June 16, 2018. Defense Minister **Andrea Katic**, representing the Executive and the armed forces, appeared before the monolith that remembers Toni Mrlak at the same point in Ljubljana where her helicopter fell. In front of the monument, together with Emilija, Tomaz and Breda, he acknowledged that the shooting down was unnecessary, regretted that the death of the pilot was misrepresented with political intentions, and dismissed as unacceptable that this attack was presented as a military success for Slovenia. **"I feel compelled to pay tribute to Toni Mrlak and apologize to the family," she concluded.**



Tomaz and Emilija Mrlak, with Defense Minister Andreja Katic in 2018
/ ON LOAN FROM MRLAK FAMILY

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war that should never happen, but if they do happen, you need the courage to admit them." As a member of the current Slovenian army, he understands that fatalities do occur in conflict, but he requires courage to face them. "There may be mistakes, they may cost lives, but they must be recognized and corrected."



The trajectory of Toni Mrlak's last flight

The last flight

Toni Mrlak dies the day Yugoslavia ceases to exist

, the day the federal army and the territorial forces are already openly confronting each other. His helicopter is shot down by one of the first shots in the entire series of wars that disintegrated the country during the 1990s. At around seven fifteen in the afternoon, as soon as he took that last flight, he was attacked at a short distance from the TR3 tower, one of the tallest buildings in the center of

light and unarmed aircraft, used mainly for the training of pilots. The device collapses at the intersection of streets 1 and 5 in the residential neighborhood of Rozna Dolina.



TR3 Tower of Ljubljana / SANTIAGO ECHEVARRÍA

"I have heard the explosion. Two people have died. Possibly, the two crew of the helicopter", narrates only a few minutes later Aurora Mínguez on National Radio from the Slovenian capital. The second deceased is Mrlak's flight technician, Macedonian Bojance Sibinovski. "They had all been part of the same side until, overnight, they were forced to open fire against each other," says Matej Surc. And Draga Potoncjak adds: **"When the war has started, it is too late . "**

Toni Mrlak had been flying with her son since he was three years

|| They had all been part of

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fourth generation of the Mrlak pilot saga, but their father does not give too much importance to them. Sigh for the last time. He only wishes he had turned around that last day to say thank you for the birthday present. The red bicycle.

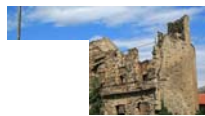
forced to open fire against each other." ||



Monument to Toni Mrlak in Ljubljana / SANTIAGO ECHEVARRÍA



The mornings of RNE with Íñigo Alfonso - 30 years since the



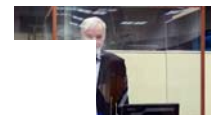
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