

Prison Break

— "We interrupt this program for a special news bulletin". The day is May 3rd 1993, and never before had Belgian television interrupted its regular broadcasts. But this was no regular day. Three of the country's most notorious and hard-nosed gangsters – Philippe Lacroix, Basri Bajrami and Murat Kaplan – escaped from St. Gilles prison in Brussels, taking two hostages with them. The first two were members of Belgium's infamous "La Bande a Haemers" gang – who's leader, Patrick Haemers, had orchestrated the kidnaping of former Prime Minister Vanden Boeynants – whilst the third was later on dubbed the escape king. Breaking news, indeed.

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01.

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If you happened to be in front of your television on that Monday, you'd have seen the prisoners drive off in a stolen BMW, a guard held down to the top of the car, head down through the roof, his body hanging over the front window.

On the car's backseat: inspector-general of Belgian prisons Harry Van Oers, who had volunteered to replace seven hostages. Fifteen years on and Van Oers is today retired but the doorbell still doesn't spell his real name: "*Nobody needs to know where I live*" he says when we meet him.

The clock had just ticked past 10h30 am that morning when Jef Vanwingh, then director of St. Gilles prison, called Van Oers in his office to alert him of the day's unfolding events at his prison. "*We have a riot going on*" said Vanwingh "*Some guards have been taken hostage by prisoners, amongst who Basri Bajrami.*"

His office at the time being in the shadow of the Palais de Justice, Van Oers rushed over to St. Gilles, his mind already evaluating the little he had in the way of options to possibly calm the situation down. His function as inspector-general meant he had already met two out of the three prisoners. What is more, he had even met Bajrami in an isolation cell – indeed, when prisons wanted to keep a convict isolated longer than nine days, the inspector-general had to be called in to judge the situation.

On his arrival at the prison gate, Van Oers found the trio holding seven members of the prison personal hostage. One guard had been stripped off his pants. This was no way to treat a man thought Van Oers. It also seemed a perfect way to gain some time: "*I told Kaplan, whom I knew the best of the three, that we couldn't talk unless the guard was given a pair of pants, so they let someone go get some for him.*"

Meanwhile, Bajrami was pointing his gun at the inspector-general. Van Oers' self-confidence had gradually increased, so while he pushed Bajrami back, his belly against the gun, he tried to calm things down: "*Tosca, this is pointless, put an end to this, now.*"

Calling Bajrami by his nickname was a clever mind trick, a strategic little game he'd repeat later that day. Time passed on and the gangsters were determined to see the light of day. Outside, a stolen BMW was waiting for them which the police had been ordered to ride up in front of the gate. In the heat of the moment, the riot gun hidden in the car went unnoticed...

"*Kadal Murat! Kadal!*" exclaimed Van Oers, telling Murat Kaplan to drive care-



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fully. Two out of the three gangsters spoke Albanian and Van Oers knew just some basic expressions, but the mind trick had its effect: "*I asked Lacroix*" he says, "*Do you understand Albanian? If not, how do you know they're not setting you up when they speak a language you don't understand?*"

Van Oers thinks the main reason the gangsters kept him hostage and didn't dump him along the road was because they needed

somebody that knew the region. After missing a meeting in an underground parking in Schaarbeek the trio was nervous to leave Brussels. "*I told them they were a bunch of amateurs*" Van Oers tells us, with a hint of laughter. When the four finally left the capital, arriving in Tildonk, Bajrami decided they needed cash and suggested Van Oers should rob a bank they had just pulled up by.

For the inspector-general this was natural-



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ly out of the question “Guys, we can still get to Leuven Centraal, just in time for dinner to be served. Let’s go. I have an important meeting too, I wouldn’t want to miss it” said Van Oers. Bajrami wasn’t convinced: “What can you arrange for us if we surrender?” The truth was there wasn’t that much Van Oers could do. On their return the convicts would face trial, as two of them were still in detention on remand. “No more than five days in isolation and... a meal” answered Van Oers. Not the most convincing of deals but the three convicts forgot their bank robbery plans and decided to hide in a villa instead.

Everberg was the next stop, where they took a couple hostage whilst waiting for sunset. The woman of the house worried about the slim Kaplan, who had been on a hunger strike before the escape. Eating was out of the question though, as Lacroix apparently advised them: “We should keep our stomachs empty like that if anything happens to us, they can practise surgery immediately.”

As night set in, the felons decided it was time to continue their escape, leaving the

couple hostage in their own house. In a second room though, Van Oers too was tied to a bed. Before leaving, the three came to say their goodbyes and were given a word of advice: “You’ll need to start understanding each other better than you did in that car today”. They took 4000 Belgian francs (€100) out of his wallet: “Good night”.

“Good night and good luck, see you in St.Gilles” replied Van Oers. A couple of days later he received the 4000 francs in his mail box, just as they had promised. Surprisingly, they had made sure to note down his address to do so.

Common prison break psychology says that escaped prisoners always return to their nest. True to form, within two weeks after their escape, the three gangsters were arrested close to their loved ones, in Laeken, Zellik and Skopje (Macedonia).

A couple of weeks after the escape, Van Oers received a phone call from Philippe Lacroix’s lawyer: “Monsieur Lacroix has been apprehended and doesn’t want to talk to us until he sees you.” Lacroix was held

in a cell in the Leuven Centraal prison and welcomed Van Oers in Dutch: “I just wanted to see you and tell you I will now change my life and start studying.”

Lacroix and Bajrami were amongst the last to be given the death penalty, which was then changed to life sentences. Lacroix was released on parole after fourteen years in prison, where he got his high school degree and is now a teacher in German languages. Bajrami was expelled to Kosovo, where he now lives with his family, after sixteen years of imprisonment. Kaplan, for his part, was released just as we were going to press, on a seven year parole... ■

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