

A War Criminal Commits Suicide By Poison In Court. What Killed Him?



By Josh Bloom — November 30, 2017



War criminal Slobodan Praljak committing suicide in court. What did he take?

It was a scene right out of a Robert Ludlum novel.

Slobodan Praljak, who had already been convicted of war crimes for his involvement in a plan to drive Muslims out of Bosnia in the early 1990s went out with a bang. After declaring in court “I just drank poison, I am not a war criminal. I oppose this conviction,” Praljak removed a small bottle or vial of colorless liquid from his pocket and swallowed the contents - a colorless liquid. Praljak later died. At this time there are no reports of the symptoms that Praljak suffered, so it is difficult to know what the poison was.



Slobodan Praljak's dramatic courtroom suicide. What was in the bottle?

But there are some subtle clues. Below I have offered three quasi-educated guesses about what the poison might have been.

1. **Sodium cyanide**

The lethal dose of sodium cyanide **(2)** in humans is about [100-200 mg](#) [1]. Its [solubility in water](#) [2] is high - 48 grams per 100 mL. From the photos of the suicide, it can be estimated that the volume of liquid consumed was at least ten mL **(3)**. So a concentrate solution of cyanide would contain 4.8 grams - about 30-times the lethal dose. The [early symptoms of cyanide poisoning](#) [3] include "lightheadedness, giddiness, rapid breathing, nausea, vomiting (emesis), feeling of neck constriction and suffocation, confusion, restlessness, and anxiety." The onset of symptoms is very fast (within minutes of ingestion). Sodium cyanide is also very easy to obtain.

Best guess: Sodium cyanide is likely candidate.

2. **Strychnine**

Strychnine comes from *Strychnos nux-vomica* aka "the Strychnine tree." **(2)** Although it has been used medically, its main use now is as rat poison. And it's a pretty decent poison. A lethal dose has been estimated to be 30-100 mg, making it more toxic than cyanide. Its effects are [anything but subtle](#) [4]:

"It works by attacking the central nervous system causing all the muscles in the body to violently contract at the same time. Such is the intensity of these convulsions that the victim will appear to "jackknife" back and forth in the latter stages of the poisoning."

Yet, it is surprisingly easy to get your hands on strychnine. You can buy it from Home Depot as [gopher bait](#) [5]. Perhaps more surprising/horrifying is that you can also [buy it online](#) [6] from supplement peddlers (!)

Is it wrong that I find this somewhat offputting?

POWDER Strychnine Tree Nux Vomica
Poison Nut Semen Strychnos Quaker
Buttons Strychnos Nux-Vomica Organic
WildCrafted Fresh Natural Herbs

A nice euphamism for rat poison

\$7.85+

Free shipping

Ask a question

OK. Why the hell are you selling poison?

Esty.com is selling you rat poison. Nice

So, was it strychnine? Probably not. It's quite insoluble in water. It takes [one liter of water](#) [7] to dissolve 160 mg of strychnine. So ten mL of a saturated solution of strychnine in water would only contain 1.6 mg, not even close to a fatal dose. If Praljak used alcohol instead he could have pulled it off. Barely. This solution would contain 67 mg of strychnine. But would Praljak know enough to do this? Probably not.

Best guess: Strychnine is unlikely. Maybe even very unlikely.

3. Ricin

Ricin. Now there's a serious poison, which is found in the seeds of castor beans. It makes the two others seem like Jello. But is it a good way to kill yourself? Yes and no. A [lethal dose of ricin](#) [8] is about 0.5 mg (one or two grains of salt), which makes it 200-400 times more toxic than cyanide. Pretty bad, right? Or not. Those numbers were for inhalation or injection of ricin. The estimated lethal dose when the stuff is swallowed is still pretty bad - 5 milligrams, which is 20-40X worse than cyanide. But only when purified. There have been case studies of ricin poisonings in people who have consumed the castor bean seeds intact. Although they get very ill they usually do not die.

*Ricin is a naturally occurring toxin derived from the beans of the castor oil plant *Ricinus communis*. It is considered a potential chemical weapon. Ricin binds to cell surface carbohydrates, is internalised then causes cell death by inhibiting protein synthesis. Oral absorption is poor and absorption through intact skin most unlikely; the most hazardous routes of exposure being inhalation and injection.*

Source: [Toxicology Data Network](#) [8]

[Extracting ricin from the seeds](#) [9] isn't all that difficult, but why go through the trouble of doing all of this to swallow something that would take days to kill you. Makes no sense, and does not concur with news reports (which have changed numerous times since the suicide. Nope, ricin doesn't make sense.

Best guess: Ricin is not the culprit.

At some point, the answers will come out. But for now I'm sticking with cyanide, so if I'm right I will go at. If not, I'm the goat. Stay tuned.

UPDATE (12/1): It was [potassium cyanide](#) [10]. YAY ME!!!!

NOTES:

- (1) For all you chuckleheads who think that natural = safe, this is one of thousands of examples to the contrary. Yet, people buy (and presumably consume) strychnine while at the same time avoid touching the receipt in the package. Duh.
- (2) Sodium and potassium cyanide are interchangeable for all practical purposes.
- (3) The ten mL is a "chemist's guess." It is based on the size of the bottle or vial, which can only be estimated by the way Praljak is holding it and how he doesn't have to open his mouth much to swallow the liquid. It is not a glass.

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Links

[1] <http://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/publications/cyanide-fact-sheet>

[2] https://pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/compound/sodium_cyanide#section=Melting-Point

[3] https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/ersbdb/emergencyresponsecard_29750036.html

[4] <https://www.planetdeadly.com/human/deadliest-poisons-man>

[5] <https://www.ebay.com/i/152560884276?chn=ps&dispctrl=1>

[6] https://www.etsy.com/listing/564458689/powder-strychnine-tree-nux-vomica-poison?gpla=1&gao=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=shopping

[home_and_living-food_and_drink-herbs_and_spices_and_seasonings-herbs_and_spices&utm_custom1=1c150e47-1913-4cea-a7bd-](https://www.etsy.com/listing/564458689/powder-strychnine-tree-nux-vomica-poison?gpla=1&gao=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=shopping)

[06bde447e486&gclid=EAlaIQobChMIzluHh8bk1wIVR4F-Ch06-A5bEakYAiABEgJsKvD_BwE](https://www.etsy.com/listing/564458689/powder-strychnine-tree-nux-vomica-poison?gpla=1&gao=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=shopping)

[7] <https://pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/compound/strychnine#section=Melting-Point>

[8] <https://toxnet.nlm.nih.gov/cgi-bin/sis/search/a?dbs+hsdb:@term+@DOCNO+3566>

[9]

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2013/04/how_to_make_ricin_you_don_t_have_to_be_a_skill

[10] <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/potassium-cyanide-found-war-criminal-s-system-after-dramatic-suicide-n825801>