

**Rajko IGIĆ**

# Reminiscences

COOK COUNTY HOSPITAL, DEPARTMENT OF  
ANESTHESIOLOGY, CHICAGO, IL, USA**RETURN TO SARAJEVO**

**W**hen we returned to Yugoslavia, I experienced a growing dissatisfaction with my job and living arrangements. It started with a problem in finding an apartment for my family. We were now three people instead of two, since Petar was born in Oklahoma City. A former colleague, Dr. Zanka Ilić, generously offered us her parents' flat in Babića Bašta, the most beautiful part of Old Sarajevo. That solved our lodging problem, but we still needed to buy a car and find someone to care for the baby. And, much to my dismay, I experienced some major resentment from my former colleagues. I began to exhibit the first symptoms of the "Portugese Disease".

I applied for and received a grant from the Republic Community for Science in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although this would help support my research, I ran into trouble buying laboratory equipment. I used money from the republic funds to buy certain items, including a post-office balance that I intended to use for the weighing of laboratory mice. The administration of my university reacted to this simple purchase in an unexpected way. They objected to the expense, which was only 150,000 Din, a meager amount, even in Yugoslavia. I finally convinced them that I needed this small piece of equipment to facilitate the function of my laboratory.

Plastic bags had just recently become available in Yugoslavia. Reasoning that this would be a good way to store and dispose of dead laboratory animals, I asked my laboratory technician to buy some. There were two nearly empty freezers in the Department. We could store the dead animals frozen, and when the freezers were full, I would call the appropriate people to remove and destroy contents. Unfortunately, the bag purchase alerted my bosses to what was going into the freezer. This created a scandal which nearly cost me my job.

There was a quickly arranged meeting of the *Zbor radnih ljudi*, the association of all employees. I had to appear before them and justify my procedures. Some even proposed that I should be punished. I carefully explained that frozen dead animals would be much less offensive than dead animals at room temperature, particularly in the summertime, and I pointed out that our department cleaning lady often forgot to empty all the waste containers in the lab. They relented, and I am sure that to this day, laboratories in Sarajevo store dead animals in freezers. Nonetheless, I became

way of introducing too many innovations, realizing belatedly that change comes slowly to an old, established system.

Despite various troubles on my return to research in Yugoslavia, I was pleased to be invited to give seminars and lectures around the country. There is no doubt in my mind that my stay in the United States gave me new status and would be a help to my research career. But I should warn other exchange scientists who visit countries with more advanced technologies and/or societies than their own: be patient in your attempts to transfer technology and innovations. Remember that you will be carefully scrutinized and often criticized. Your own improved status will arouse feelings of jealousy and inadequacy in your colleagues.

**PROFESOR ERDÖS IN YUGOSLAVIA**

After my situation in the university quieted down, Professor Erdős came to Sarajevo as a Fulbright fellow. He arrived in Zagreb, where he stayed for a short time with Dr. Ljubomir Hotujac, a scientist who earned his degree in Sarajevo under my supervision. Then the professor traveled to Sarajevo, where he stayed for at least 10 days. We also made arrangements for him to visit Split, Sombor and Belgrade.

*Sarajevo.* Dr. Erdős and I spent time together in my own lab, where we prepared a report to be presented at the upcoming International Pharmacological Meeting in Paris. Although we had failed to organize a series of lectures for the professor in our own department of pharmacology, much use was made of his expertise by the Society of Nephrologists. Dr. Enisa Bašagić was president of that society, and she not only arranged a keynote lecture, but also a fine dinner party at her home. For many years afterwards Professor Erdős would rave about her "zeljanica", or spinach pie, that is made with layers of spinach, special cheese and filo dough. This dish is, in my opinion, truly first rate.

Sarajevo is full of history and different cultures. Originally a mining town settled with Christians, it was once exploited by merchants from the coastal Dubrovnik, then the Turks, Jews, and others settled, as well. The Turkish influence dating back to the 1400s is everywhere, and there are many mosques throughout the city. Dr. Erdős spent his evenings reading the history of the city, and during the days he explored its narrow streets and stone alley ways, accompanied only by his camera. He remarked on his impression when standing at the corner of the street where, on June 28, 1914, Archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sophia were shot by a young Serbian student: "The footprints of this teenager where he stood while was shooting, are rather small, even smaller than mine." (The footprints of the assassin, Gavrilo Princip, are impressed in cement in front of the museum).

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The manuscript was received: 17. 09. 2000

Accepted for publication: 22. 09. 2000

One evening, Dr Erdős, my wife, I and our small son Petar attended a festival of military musicians at the newly opened cultural and sport center "Skenderija". Later, the whole world would watch the Winter Olympics of 1984 in this same Sports Center. But for now, how lucky we were to have the very best military bands from USSR, USA, and 15 other nations-all assembled in one place! The highest party leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Comrades Branko Mikulić, and Hamdija Pozderac, were in attendance as well. They occupied the central lounge that evening, adding to the ceremonious mood of the occasion. Professor Erdős took many photos, and, always the objective scientist, he suggested that we measure the duration of the applause for each orchestra. Although our Yugoslav army orchestra performed satisfactorily, and the USA and USSR bands were applauded with similar intensity and duration, the dynamic Libyan orchestra got a standing ovation. "They were obviously trained by English soldiers", remarked the profesor.

The next day, we drove out on an excursion. We planned to visit an orphanage in Pale, which put us on the old road over Trebević. Later there would be a newer and shorter route, but for the moment, we were consigned to the old road. Just as we crossed the narrow gage railway at the exit from the city of Sarajevo, a fruit stand caught the professor's eye. How could anyone miss those bright, fresh cherries from Mostar?

"Please stop just one moment", he said, already climbing out of the car. I hopped out to act as an interpreter. "One kilo of the cherries, please".

The shop assistant cheerfully weighed out the fruit, but when I tried to pay him, he refused the money. "It is my treat for the guest from America", said he.

As we climbed back into the car, the professor turned to me with a smile. "Do you think you could ever expect that from a fruit stand in New York City?"

*Split.* We next embarked upon a sight-seeing tour that would take us along the coast to Split. Along with another colleague of mine, we drove towards Split and did some fine sightseeing, including Trogir and other sites of interest. We also had a bit of an adventure when Professor Erdős encountered the Split Police Department (SUP). It started when the reception desk clerk at our hotel noticed that the professor's passport lacked a seal with the date of his entry into the country. A summons to the police department followed. My colleague, Dr. Zvonko Rumboldt, and I accompanied Professor to the SUP. The head of the SUP read aloud, in an authoritative voice, the extract from the Law about foreigners. He then stated that the professor had entered the country illegally and that he must leave it within 24 hours.

"But I arrived in Zagreb on a plane that was practically empty", the professor said, "and all of the passengers passed though passport control without anyone noticing, because all the employees were watching the Yugoslav national team compete in a soccer match". This information was digested by the head of the SUP with little effect. Dr. Rumboldt then spoke up. "Look here, this is

a distinguished scientist with a worldwide reputation. Professor Erdős is a man of integrity, and I, as a citizen of Split, would guarantee for him".

Again, this plea fell upon deaf ears. We spent a long time arguing back and forth, but the head of the SUP was adamant. I could see that there could be no positive resolution. Then I had an idea.

Choosing my words very carefully, I casually remarked, "After visiting Split, Professor Erdős will go to Sombor where he is invited to stay in Tito's villa. He will be giving a lecture to a select audience of doctors and scientist from Vojvodina."

Much to my amazement, the SUP head immediately apologized to the professor for having detained him and offered drinks all around. Although we politely declined the drinks, we were much amused at this sudden burst of hospitality.

We forgot all about the SUP by the time we came to the Riva, a beautiful walkway that faces the sea. We sat for awhile in a small cafe next to Diocletian's place, then we strolled over to the ground floor of the palace museum. This well-preserved Roman building gave us all an opportunity to revisit the ancient times of Diocletian's rule. Born into a humble family around 245 AD in the Roman province of Illyria, not far from Split, Diocletian pursued a military career that eventually placed him on the imperial throne. By his own ingenuity, Diocletian ended a half century of anarchy in Rome and restored long-lasting stability and law to his lands. His contemporaries called him the "Father of the Golden Age", but at the age of fifty-five, Diocletian abdicated his throne and spent the remaining eleven years of life in this immense palace he built for himself. Split has spread beyond the palace walls, but the core of it still lies within the four palace gates. From this place, Diocletian viewed the demise of the tetrarchy of his successors in civil war. The story goes that when Maximian asked Diocletian to return to power and end conflict, he replied that if Maximian could see the excellent cabbages he was growing in his garden, he would not ask him to sacrifice such contentment for the mere pursuit and cares of power.

Dr. Rumboldt left us there, but Professor Erdős and I continued on to the Meštrović Gallery, built in the 1930s according to Ivan Meštrović's own plan. Ivan Meštrović, who spent his childhood in a rural village close to Split, was a stone carver, sculptor and painter who spent his life in both Yugoslavia and the United States. The museum houses a large collection of his works in marble, stone, wood and bronze, as well as his oil paintings. Since it was late afternoon, we were the only visitors. The Gallery Attendant was happy to answer all our questions, but he refused to allow us to take photos inside. However, outside in the garden we could take as many photos of the huge bronze pieces as we wanted.

We returned to the city to find the promenade at the Riva full of people. Dr. Erdős quickly noted that virtually all of them were women. This was readily explained when I discovered that "Hajduk", a local soccer club, was at that moment playing against their old rival the "Red Star". The soccer match also accounted

for the fact that we could not get a place in the hotel Park, the hotel where the Belgrade soccer team always stayed. In Yugoslavia, soccer is an important event that displaces all other cultural and political considerations.

The next morning, we climbed the stairs to the Maryan Hill to find an exquisite view of Split and its busy harbor. There we could see the comings and goings of many passenger ships and ferries that connect the city to many islands and to Italian cities on the opposite Adriatic coast.

When Nikita Sergejevich Khrushchev, Premier of the Soviet Union, was about to finish his visit to Split, an aide mentioned a well known saying: "If you were not at Maryan, you did not visit Split". Khrushchev then unexpectedly decided to see Split from this hill, though the visit was not in the official itinerary. Actually, he left the Blue Train, and the entourage followed him from the railway station to Maryan. The citizens of Split were irritated because the traffic at Riva was at a stand still for hours. The professor and I also visited Maryan. So, according to Khrushchev, we did visit Split.

*Sombor.* Upon our return to Sarajevo, I requested an interview with Professor Erdős for our local newspaper and was told that Ms. Bogdanka Likar, who was responsible for covering science and medicine, would be happy to talk with him. The next day, just as we were ready to leave for Sombor, my wife, Danica, called us back. She handed me a copy of the "Oslobođenje" which had an entire page devoted to the interview, complete with a photo of the professor over a whole page. It was a nice tribute to the professor, and it seemed to impress even my four-year old son, Petar-Gordan, who would be traveling along with us to Sombor.

Professor Erdős stayed in a beautiful villa in Sombor owned by the municipality. There he gave a talk to a group of local doctors and professors from the medical school in Novi Sad. There was much animated discussion following the lecture, and the professor remarked to me, "Here, they ask much better questions than in London, where I speak the same language".

As in other places we visited, Professor Erdős very much enjoyed visiting the local market. He found much material for his camera at the markets where all the country folk gathered to sell and buy their produce. Even during his short stay with us in Tuzla he would get up early and go to the market simply to examine the fresh products from surrounding villages and to observe the people selling their wares and chatting with one another.

That particular Friday was a big market day in Sombor. Even before daybreak, more than a thousand people from the neighboring villages began to arrive with their goods, disturbing the quiet of the still sleeping town. The din of cars and vans, competing with the rattle of wagons and the cries of animals and people. This pre-dawn commotion soon gave way to the bustle of dozens of citizens arriving to purchase the goods on display—from the simplest fresh country produce to large farm animals. There were manufactured goods as well, including the work of artisans and factories from various parts of Yugoslavia, Hungary,

Romania, Poland, Ukraine, and Italy. As usual, the market scene was an impressive medley of people, products, language, and cultures. In addition to the dialects of Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, and Slovak, Ukrainian, Russian, Albanian and other languages could be heard. I steered the professor to my favorite part of the market, the dairy section. Among the many homemade products of the Sombor region, Sombor Cheese is the best known. This delicate cheese is made from whole milk and is sold in small vats weighing 5-10 lbs. There is a widely circulated story that Sir Winston Churchill was so fond of the Sombor Cheese, that during the World War II, a package of cheese was regularly forwarded to him from occupied Sombor.

After the market, we visited the art gallery "Milan Konjović" and met the eponymous painter, a tall, strong man in his seventies. Konjović has long been the legend in his own country. He returned from Paris to Sombor to immortalize the Vojvodina plain and its people in his paintings.

In the evening my family invited the Professor on a trip to Apatin for dinner. The trip by car was itself an adventure. Beside the Professor and myself, there were three others - my sister Beba, my brother-in-law, Milan, and a school friend - all of us rather large people. It was a real feat to squeeze all five of us into my small French car.

After a half hour's drive, we reached our destination on the Danube. The "charda", as we in Vojvodina and Slavonija would call it, comes from the Hungarian csárdà, and it refers to any of the small and pleasant restaurants located along the river. Here one can eat well, drink a lot, and enjoy the talents of the Tsigani, or Gypsy, musicians. It was the general rule for diners to participate in various folk dances, including csárdàs (pronounce: chardash), the dance of the Carpathian basin that comes from the homeland of the legendary Count Dracula, known as a vampire Dracula ("vampire" is one of very few words by which, according to W.W. Skeat's Etymological Dictionary, Serbian language has enriched English language).

We dined on fish paprikash (fish stew), roasted carp, home made noodles and "žilavka", the famous wine from the Mostar region and conversed in a blend of English, Hungarian and German. Because the local people are always interested in visitors, the headwaiter invited us to see how the paprikash was prepared. At least twenty small kettles were suspended on chains over an open fire. The chief cook escorted us proudly to the one in which our stew cooked. There he provided spoons for us to taste it and he promised to adjust the spices according to our wishes. The aroma of all the various stews and smoldering fires was so enticing that we could hardly wait for our kettle and the accompanying noodles to be presented at our table.

A dozen Gypsy musicians played Serbian, Croatian, Hungarian, and, of course, Gypsy songs on violins, tamburitzas and contrabasses. As we were finishing our meal, the orchestra approached our table to play and sing our requests. In keeping with the mood, I chose "U tem Somboru" (In that Sombor), "Az a szèp, az a szèp,

a ki nyeki szemek kek“ (How pretty is the one with blue eyes) among others. Although we encouraged the professor to dance, he respectfully declined.

After dinner we strolled along the faintly lit bank of the river. At Apatin the Danube is almost as wide as the Mississippi river at St. Louis. It flows sluggishly through this flat land, carrying an enormous quantity of water toward the Black Sea. Although it was a clear night, we could see the opposite river bank only when a well-lit ship appeared. The vastness of the river seemed appropriately symbolic of our blend of cultures and the passage of time.

*Belgrade.* After our stay in Sombor, we stopped in Ravno Selo to visit my sister and her husband. Professor Erdős was amazed not only by their tidy house with its well-ordered garden, a tractor, and other farm equipment, but by the fact that they had a telephone in their home. His reaction was not surprising, because even as late as 25 years ago, the telephone was a rarity in many parts on the world, including parts of Europe.

By the time we reached Belgrade, Professor Erdős was ready to assume his role as lecturer and visiting scientist. He entertained the Belgrade biochemists and physiologists with an excellent review of his research. We were then invited by Ljubiša Rakić, a prominent academician, to dinner at the Writers' Club. Both Professor Erdős and I were surprised to find that every guest in the club seemed to know our host quite well. We found Dr. Rakić to be well informed about the current political situation and an excellent conversationalist as well.

The following day we stopped for lunch at Skadarlija, a section in Belgrade that boasts of many first class national restaurants. The day was nice and sunny, and we found a nice table outside. While we were eating, a group that included the Hungarian ambassador entered the restaurant, leaving the chauffeur outside with the car. The professor found it odd that they did not invite the driver to join them. He recalled that, as a child, he traveled all over Hungary with his father. They always invited the driver to share their meal. I explained that in Yugoslavia the group would not likely invite the driver to join them simply because of their concern for the safety of the car.

*Tuzla.* Professor Erdős visited Yugoslavia again after I had moved to the newly established Medical School in Tuzla. The Department of Pharmacology was temporarily located at the Technological Faculty building while a new building was in progress. I was by now the chairman of Pharmacology. The professor told me, „You are luckier than Professor Bogdanović in Belgrade. His Institute of Pharmacology was put in the Veterinary Faculty building and remained there even after they celebrated its 50th anniversary“. At the time of professor's visit, there were only two old hotels in the town, although several modern ones were under construction. I reserved a suite for our guest in the hotel Sloboda, but despite my efforts, he was given only a very modest room. It seems that some one star general chose that time to visit Tuzla as well, and in those days, even a minor military figure took priority over a distinguished scientist.

I needed to arrange transportation for Professor Erdős to Tuzla from Szeged, in Hungary, where he was attending a scientific symposium. I asked Dr. Bogoljub Zelen, director of the Health Center in Bačka Topola, to provide a car with chauffeur to drive him to Tuzla, as there was no direct transportation from Szeged to Tuzla. Not only did they provide the car, but they kindly arranged for our guest to visit the well-known horse-farm „Zobnatica“ for an elegant lunch and a tour of the facility.

Dr. Erdős gave several lectures to our graduate students and to doctors from both Tuzla and Sarajevo. After his professional duties were done, he took time out to visit Dubrovnik on the Adriatic coast. After this brief holiday, we planned to travel together again to Sombor. This time we visited the home and studio of the well-known naive painter, Sava Stojkov. Dr. Erdős had a keen interest in the naive paintings of central Europe, and since I knew this artist, I was happy to arrange an introduction. Stojkov lived in close proximity to my mother's place, in a lovely house with a huge and beautiful garden. He showed us at least thirty of his paintings. The professor chose one to buy a typical Stojkov work a large oil featuring several simple village houses with a few peasants and a pond. Stojkov often varied the peasant motif to suit the taste of the European market or his wealthy Yugoslav clients. Allegedly, he gave some of his paintings to visiting politicians and to the TV editors who provided free him publicity. However, even a prominent visiting scientist does not equal a local politician--the professor was required to pay. When we had completed the purchase of the painting, which was quite expensive, Dr. Erdős remarked, „I do not know who here is the real naive, the painting or its buyer“.

Nonetheless, this painting still hangs in the hall of his home in Chicago. It is but one of many others that he has collected from all over the world.

*A Shaky Exit.* The professor's visit in Yugoslavia was uneventful until the very end when I drove him to the airport in my own car. We were half way to the airport at Surčin when, all of a sudden, my car stopped dead. On careful inspection I found that a broken accelerator wire. We were in quite a fix. We had little time to spare, and we could not simply leave the car on the road and seek a taxi that would take far too long.

I was finally able to ignite the engine of my Ami 8 by a hand-held starter, and I managed to attach a pencil to the carburetor to keep the gas flowing. In this way, we could travel at 30-40 kilometers per hour in second or third gear. After a jerky start, somewhat like what one would see in an old Charlie Chaplin film, we made good time and arrived nearly 30 minutes before the plane was to depart. It was a bit tense there for awhile, but the mission was accomplished.