



In Memoriam Ante Radeljić (1933-2002)

Several centuries ago, a cannonball was fired from a fortress in Imotski, a town in the territory of today's south Croatia, to determine where the border between Turkish and Venetian empires would be. As with a pair of calipers, a semicircular line to the north of Imotski was drawn, passing through the point where the shell had fallen. The same border today divides Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, or more precisely, Croats living in these two neighboring countries.

Thus, a randomly fired gun shell decided upon the destiny of people who have been born and living in Imotski area ever since – they have been “living on the edge” one way or the other.

Dr Ante Radeljić was from Imotski. He died on January 17, 2002. Ante was a Croatian physician who spent his entire working life in Germany, where he became a successful plastic surgeon, dear to all who knew him and loved by many, myself included.

It was easy to love Ante Radeljić, for he was nice, smart, knowledgeable, modest, and friendly. Many people had many reasons to be fond of him – he was a good physician and generous person, and helped many – but my reason was quite unique and special. For world is full of skillful plastic surgeons, good fathers, noble man, and great patriots, but Ante Radeljić was unique in his stoical way of bearing with pain I was so familiar with myself.

He was a rare breed. Born into the bottom social class, he made it all the way to the top. Yet, his life was not a story of success, but of a man from Imotski. Each man born in 1933 in a village near Imotski, South Croatia, like Ante, was bound to suffer, give more to get less, be prosecuted, betrayed, cheated, live on the edge of the society, and survive only with great efforts and lots of luck. Imotski was a poor town, in every period of its history and under every regime. After World War II, there was too much stubborn na-

tionalism and Catholicism in the air, which brought nothing but defeat, devastation, and prosecution to the people in the area. Those who stayed in Imotski couldn't prosper, whereas those who left could never come back. Ante Radeljić left and was unable to come back, although he yearned for return more than anything else.

He never complained. Men of Imotski are used to solve all their problems themselves. He studied medicine in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, and favorite city of Imotski men. After graduating in 1962, he went to Germany for surgery residency. In 1970, he returned to Split (another highly-praised resort among Imotski men), stayed for a year, and then left for Germany again. From this detail from Ante's life few can discern the great tragedy of the Croatian Spring, and recognize patriotic feelings and hope that operated in the background of Ante's return. When the Spring movement was crushed, he, like many other dreamers of the time, deeply disappointed and bereaved of hope, left again into the foreign world.

So he concentrated on surgery, and all what that noble profession can bring him in a noble country such as Germany. He became respected, skillful, and rich, but remained modest, friendly, and supportive. He conceived a beautiful family, built a house, ran a department and then a whole hospital, traveled, lectured, and above all – worked.

Yet, something was missing. First he thought that it was Croatia that he missed, a dream of his homeland as a free and independent state that was torn apart in 1971. Then in 1991 the dream came true – we got a free, sovereign, independent country of our own. Soon we assembled the World Association of Croatian Physicians and met each other, met old friends, and were finally able to breath freely, speak freely, and think freely.

Yet, there was still something missing. That dream from the childhood about life in Imotski, a dream that never came true, about having a warm, beautiful family life in the middle of windy rocky hills, under the hot sun and mild rains, with caring parents, devoted brothers, kind cousins, and temperamental friends. This dream was gone with years that passed and could not be brought back. Ante's family never experienced Imotski of his childhood and his dreams. They were born and lived in the Western world, and preferred London over Split, Berlin over Zagreb, and Frankfurt over Imotski. Ante was reluctant to suggest the return to his homeland. He waited, and waited, hoping that some day soon he will get the chance to settle in Imotski and live his childhood dream, all the dreams that he lost. And then he died as he lived, quietly, honorably, and modestly. When men of Imotski die, they do it so to spare all others the trouble and embarrassment of their dying. In his last days the only person he asked to see was a Franciscan

priest from Imotski he had known since he was a child. What more can one wish in the end but a friendly priest from the childhood?

Ante was buried in Imotski. Somehow, people recognize and help us fulfill our strongest desires only after we die. It was of crucial importance for Ante to be buried in Imotski. His life would have been wasted, his death dishonored, were he not buried with his parents and priests, warriors, beggars, smugglers, doctors, and poets.

Has he done, has he achieved what a man expects from himself? We do not know. We will never know. For a man from Imotski who wandered all his life in foreign countries, waging foreign battles, getting buried in his church's graveyard was essential. I believe that we would all be happy if we ourselves could achieve that much.

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