

Physician and Patriot: Ivan Šarac (1961-2006)

Ivan Šarac was born in Mandino Selo near the town of Tomislavgrad in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where he finished his premedical education. To study medicine and become a physician was a natural choice for Ivan, as he was always a brilliant student, hard-working, quiet, and responsible. He graduated from the Medical School in Split, Croatia in 1987, went back to Bosnia and Herzegovina and started working as a general practitioner in the Health Center in Tomislavgrad. Had he lived in a normal country, he would have probably stayed there. But his people suffered from injustice and lack of liberties more than from all the diseases together. In the 1980s, communism in European countries, including former Yugoslavia, started to crumble under the national aspirations of the people on the one hand, and all weaknesses of Marxist planned economy on the other. The 1990s witnessed the deep changes in the geopolitical arrangement of Europe, which in some parts of the continent did not go without bloodshed.

Ivan was elected representative to the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the first free elec-

tions in the country in late 1990. Few have fought with such a zeal and pride for the rights of their people as Ivan did. He was always outspoken, clearly thinking, and direct, dedicated to his aims and faithful to



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his mission. This happened just before 1991 Serbian aggression against Croatia, while Radovan Karadžić was preparing the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbs wanted “all to live in one country,” and having under control the former Yugoslav Army, they were determined to make it happen irrespective of the rights or other people. Then the open war broke out in Croatia. Serbs were ravaging Vukovar and Dubrovnik and soon occupied a quarter of Croatia. When Serbs destroyed and burned down Ravno village in Herzegovina in September 1991, Croats in Bosnia

and Herzegovina knew that the war had started in their country too. At that time, Bosniak (Muslim) leadership headed by Alija Izetbegović could not make up their minds on whether Bosnia and Herzegovina should remain in Yugoslavia, so that Muslim community could live “all in one country” (with Muslims in Sandžak and Albanian Muslims in Kosovo) or be defended. Croats from Bosnia and Herzegovina had no dilemma about this issue. After seeing what was going on in Croatia and realizing what was about to happen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they wanted to protect the country against the aggression the best they could. One of the instruments to do that was to get international recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a sovereign and independent country. But as a prerequisite for the referendum on independence to take place, a Declaration of Independence had to be brought, for which the merit goes to Ivan Šarac. The Declaration had to be voted and accepted by the two-thirds of the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, none of the three constitutive people (Serbs, Croats, and Muslims) had the re-

quired majority. Ivan insisted on breaking up the constitutional and legal bonds with the aggressor (former Yugoslavia) and pushed hard to have it discussed at the Parliament. But, the Declaration was not supported by a sufficient number of Muslim representatives and did not become effective. Later on, when Izetbegović saw what was happening to his people, he supported Croatian motion and the Declaration was finally accepted. The referendum on independence took place, Croatian plebiscite endorsed it, and Serbs, realizing that they could not keep the country under control anymore, left the Parliament and started an open war.

In war years, Ivan, together with his colleagues, organized health care service for Croatian Defense Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He dealt with humanitarian issues, including exchange of war prisoners, search for missing persons, and cooperation with Croatia in provid-

ing health care to the war casualties, military and civilian, who we could not provide care for and treat for various reasons, primarily for the lack of equipment. He was highly decorated for his work many times. Everything he did during the war was sort of a war of his own – for the health of his people. It helped him realize the importance of public health, so he contributed immensely to the establishment of health care institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially to the idea of building the Dr Fra Mato Nikolić hospital in Nova Bila. Ivan was also one of the founders of Medical School in Mostar. After the war, he became the Minister of Health of the Croatian Community of Herceg-Bosnia.

Ivan specialized in public health and finished his graduate studies in Zagreb, and then got a position in the Croatian Army. He was involved in international cooperation and reform of the health care

system in the Croatian Army. Carrying the rank of colonel, Ivan was sent to the US for further education in military medicine, and came back with flying colors, took a job in the Croatian Institute of Public Health and worked on legal public health issues and health needs planning. *Croatian Medical Journal* was the first journal where he published his work in the field of public health.

Zagreb was the place where Ivan founded his family. He married a colleague physician, Helen, and soon they got a lovely daughter, Iva. When everything seemed to be perfect and the life was finally back to normal, Ivan got sick. He fought the disease for two long years, firmly believing that no adverse outcome was possible – Christ would either make him healthy or take him, and “either scenario was good.” He left us with unshaken trust in life and fellow men.

Ivan Bagarić