

Personal Narrative of Prof. Željko Bošnjak, Laureate of Croatian National Decoration for Humanitarian Work

When the phone rang at 3 AM, we thought someone had dialed the wrong number. It was a call from the Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia, saying that the President would appreciate my presence in Zagreb the following week. Although I was unable to attend an award ceremony in 1999 to receive the Ruder Bošković national Decoration for achievement in Science, I was excited to be able to travel to Croatia in June 2006 to meet President Stipe Mesić and receive the honorable Katarina Zrinska national decoration for Humanitarian Services to my native Croatia. It was a wonderful and humbling experience.

I was born shortly after World War II in Virovitica and spent my first five years in Slavonija, the rich and beautiful agricultural region of Croatia. My family might still be living there had it not been for the very thoughtful and generous Communist regime, which felt compelled to relieve us from our bothersome house and considerable land, inherited from our grandparents. I am positive that our distant German heritage played no role in this kind gesture. Starting a new life in Zagreb would normally present a struggle, but luckily my family owned nothing now and so we did not have to worry about losing much. My late father Andrija was a master tailor and had a job as a night watchman for a few months, but was laid off. For the next fifteen years, he was privileged to work on an assembly line as a tailor and had to work alternate shifts. After I completed high school, things were going so well that one day my parents decided that we needed to relo-

cate to the United States. With the great help of Caritas Croata in Vienna and specifically Father Vilim Cecelja and Father Božić, this idea became reality in 1970. Our family – my parents, my sister and I, settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We started over again from scratch. The real heroes were my parents, who in spite of all of their hardships had a positive outlook on life. They were instrumental in teaching my sister Mira and me to appreciate everything in life. It was very hard to leave Zagreb, but at that time, I had no doubt Communism would last for ever. Luckily, it didn't. My only regret was that my Dad did not live long enough to witness the free, independent, and democratic Croatia. I am sure he had a fine time watching this happen from a heavenly perspective.

Moving to the United States meant a new beginning for all of us. Nine years later, with a Doctorate in Physiology from the Medical College of Wisconsin, I was ready to establish myself academically and to start making inroads with the scientific community in my homeland. Although I did not know anyone at the higher education level at the time, during the early 80s someone recommended me to contact Professor Matko Marušić. That was before the evolution of e-mail and personal computers, yet still we managed to forge a strong bond that has survived the Homeland War of the early 90s, and continues to thrive to this very day.

From the very beginning, Professor Marušić and I began collaborating on training young clinicians and scientists from Croatia in the Unit-

ed States. The training program was specifically oriented toward postdoctoral fellows and graduate students. As a result, more than 50 individuals have either completed, or are in the process of completing, their studies in Milwaukee. A vast majority of these top performing individuals were recommended by Professor Marušić and, as a result, there have been significant contributions to both the Medical College of Wisconsin and my laboratories during their training. Currently, there are four graduate students and four fellows in the training program. It is my belief that we have achieved quite a success over the years, although as Matko would indicate, and I would not disagree, it could have possibly been better (1). The main problems that the program encountered were that some fellows decided to stay in the United States and thus not participate in the advancement of Croatian science, or that they did not contribute as expected upon their return to Croatia. Nevertheless, I am still very pleased with our achievements and believe that this training, even with its drawbacks, is our most important contribution to the development of science in Croatia. As to the continued success of individuals finishing their fellowships in Milwaukee, a fine example is the Medical School in Split and the contributions made by Drs Željko and Jagoda Dujic, Zoran Đogaš, Mladen and Nataša Boban, Zoran and Maja Valić, Stojan and Volga Polić, Božo Bota, Damir and Liana Sapunar, and others. Soon, they will be joined by Jasna Marinović and Marko Ljubković, two graduate students in the Milwaukee Physiology Program. In a few years, Marija Raguž and Domagoj Mladinov will also return with their doctorate degrees. The current postdoctoral fellows in the Departments of Physiology or Anesthesiology (Izabela Jugovac, Filip Sedlić, Marija Renić, and Danica Jakovčević) are doing outstanding research work. I am confident that this critical mass of excellent scientists will continue to prosper and grow with the unwavering support of Minister Dragan Primorac, Rector Ivan Pavić from Split, and others.

The critical talent at the Medical School in Split did not develop overnight (2). It took some time and was well worth the effort. With this in place, the continuous input from the Croatian scientific community in Diaspora, will guarantee their success (3), as well as significant academic contributions to Croatia. It is critical to develop the scientific market to offset the loss of scientists from this small country (4). I am fortunate to have been involved in many other activities involving Croatia. Many of these activities also directly or indirectly benefited the talented groups, such as the one at the Medical School in Split and other universities in Croatia.

Over the past 20 years, my participation in and organization of various congresses and symposia in Croatia has been very fulfilling and rewarding. The various meetings were held, or are going to be held, in several cities (Table 1). These activities were mainly initiated by the leaders of the academic community of Croatia and included individuals such as Drs Mladen Perić, Mladen Rakić, Alan Šustić, Danijel Rukavina, Ivan Miličić, Pero Lučin, Ante Tucak, and many oth-

Table 1. Past and future scientific meetings organized in Croatia

Venue	Meeting
Zagreb:	
1984	Croatian Physiological Society Meeting
1986	Croatian Physiological Society Meeting
1992	Anesthesiology Symposium
2004	First Congress of Croatian Scientists
Stubičke Toplice:	
2002	World Association of Croatian Physicians (WACP) Meeting
Split:	
1993	Current Topics in Anesthesiology
1994	Anesthesiology Symposium
2001	Current topics in Anesthesiology, Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine
2003	Selected Topics in Anesthesiology, Intensive Care and Reanimation
Hvar:	
1996	First Croatian World Congress of Anesthesiology
Mostar:	
1996	Seminar meetings – Mostar Medical School
Rijeka:	
2005	The days of Anesthesiology in Rijeka
Dubrovnik:	
2005	Current Topics in Anesthesiology
2007	European-American Anesthesia Conference 2007
Opatija:	
1997	WACP Meeting
2004	Croatian Cardiac Society Meeting
2006	Alpe-Adria Anesthesia Symposium

ers. We were truly fortunate that so many experts from around the globe offered their participation and help. With their expertise came the opportunity for future collaborations, ie, between the University of Split and Mayo Clinic, Norway Universities, Medical College of Wisconsin, and others. These collaborations also led to the formation of the International PhD Program which has just begun between Croatia, Norway, and the United States. In addition, I am actively involved in the dedicated and hard work performed by Dr Lučin to reform the doctorate studies in Croatia as part of the the National Foundation for Science, Higher Education and Technological Development of the Republic of Croatia. Moreover, I was recently honored by an invitation of the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports and the National Council for Science to serve as an international reviewer of research proposals submitted by Croatian scientists. Also, I have been invited by the National Council for Higher Education, to become a member of a referee team that will evaluate proposals for various academic programs at Croatian Universities. My current work as an Editor of the *Anesthesiology*, Vice Chairman for Research, NIH reviewer, as well as the continued funding that I have received from the NIH for the past 20 years, have been very beneficial in contributing to the evaluation process as a member of the referee team.

The World Association of Croatian Physicians was formed during the Homeland war in 1991 (5). It was created as an association of individuals and institutions, and constituted mainly of Croatian physicians, scientists, dentists, pharmacists, and veterinarians. Persons of Croatian origin or other nationalities who desired to contribute to a better international understanding of the situation in Croatia, and who desired to support Croatian public health were welcome to join the Association. The Association provided tremendous assistance to Croatia during the war and during the post-war development, and this will never be forgotten (6). After the critical pe-

riod of approximately ten years after the war, the unity and continued leadership has waned within the association. When asked to contribute to the leadership, I offered a vision of this Association as a meeting point between Croatian physicians and scientists at home and abroad, as well as a professional link for interactions between members working and living in different countries. Unfortunately, I could not obtain the critical support needed to achieve this goal. The input of our Diaspora is not organized and it has remained in the hands of the individuals such as Ivo Baća, Ante Tucak, Ivan Bokan, Josip Bill, Ante Padjen, Davor Vugrin, Ivan Đikić, and Dubravko Pavlin, to name a few.

Because of the lack of leadership from outside, it is very important for everyone to support the initiatives of the Ministry of Science, Education, and Sports. For instance, an outstanding effort was initiated by Minister Dragan Primorac in the organization of The Congresses of Croatian Scientists in Croatia and from Diaspora (7). I am an optimist and firmly believe that the first Congress in 2004 was a success, and that Croatia will not only succeed in furthering the current status of scientists, but will also succeed in many other endeavors. Although some of these efforts will take some time to accomplish, there is no question that as a team we will succeed. If you do not believe me, look at the low odds of Croatia's survival as a country sixteen years ago (8,9). Today, Croatia's future looks very promising. We will succeed and prosper.

The real aim of this brief summary of some of my experiences is to tell you just how rewarding and fulfilling life has been for me and my family. I am very thankful to be given an opportunity to be in a position to benefit from this rich experience. During my many interactions and trips to Croatia, there have been numerous memorable times and joyous moments. The beauty of sharing a meal with Matko's mother, Tonka, enjoying her heavenly gnocchi was a special once-in-a-lifetime experience. When Mary and

I visited Milan Goja and Nenad Vidaković and their families in Zadar, we cried together because they “felt as if they were reborn” after their kidney transplants in Milwaukee. We are all fortunate that both Milan and Nenad were placed on the transplant list at our hospital and, within two years, received kidneys. Because of the great distance and the acute timing involved, we had to stay in touch 24 hours a day, even during several of my trips to Japan. Everyone worked very hard to make this possible, including Tankerska Plovidba with their financial help and the helicopter transportation to Zagreb by the Croatian Air Force. Currently, we are working to place another kidney transplant candidate on the list, also from Zadar. It turns out that, here in Wisconsin, we have one of the best organ procurement organizations in the United States. In the past, several individuals from our transplant team have offered to present workshops in Croatia. I hope we will be able to accomplish this task in the future.

Finally, my most heartfelt thanks go to the past and current Croatian scientists who had the inspiration, drive, and most of all, the patience

and determination, while building the steady advancement of science in our native Croatia. With these individuals I share this beautiful award.

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