

Obituary: Marin Nola (1964-2008) Can One Imagine Croatian Pathology Without Him?

*Now cracks a noble heart.
Good-night, sweet prince;
And flights of angels sing thee
to thy rest.*

Shakespeare, Hamlet

Confronted with the sudden death of my good friend and collaborator Professor Marin Nola, I am not sure whether it is even appropriate to ask a question like the one in the title of this *Obituary*. Conventionally, we would have answered it with a negation, but Marin Nola was not a conventional man. Hence, the answer must be affirmative, because Marin would not have accepted anything else. However, I am sure, and many others who have followed the recent blossoming of Croatian pathology would most likely agree, it will not be the same without him. His unex-

pected death, only a few days before his 44th birthday, has been



Marin Nola (1964-2008)

such an enormous loss that it will take time for all of his friends to accept it, regain our strength, and continue along the guidelines traced and envisioned by our dear Marin. Only time will tell whether this will be possible at all. Nevertheless, we must continue from the point where Marin has left us; we owe it to him and his memory. So far as I am concerned, I will try

to do my best to keep that memory alive and from time to time look on my wall, where I have inscribed a sentence from Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953) "... *you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.*"

I met Marin in the early 1990s during one of my visits to Zagreb. I should mention that by then I had already spent 20 years in the US and have decided that it was time to give back something to my homeland. With the encouragement of my friends, Professors Stanko Jukić and Mara Dominis from the Department of Pathology in Zagreb, I raised enough money in the US to buy the translation rights for a major American textbook of pathology. Soon thereafter, they and their associates translated Robbins' textbook of Pathology into Croatian. In the next step of modernizing

the teaching of Pathology in Croatia, we introduced computer-based teaching methods into the curriculum and completely reformed the pathology course at the Zagreb Medical School. At this point, our efforts were unexpectedly invigorated by the appearance of a young visionary enthusiast – Dr Marin Nola. He had just completed his training in pathology, he was energetic, and he was eager to take upon himself major responsibilities. And as the saying goes – the rest is history.

Within two-three years after joining our team, Marin Nola became the cynosure and epicenter of all that was happening in the field of pathology teaching in Zagreb. Indefatigably, he was teaching students, preparing teaching materials, composing quizzes, testing multiple choice questions, and preparing material for oral exams. Pathology became the highest-rated medical student course at the Zagreb Medical School. Numerous students were attracted to him or fell under his influence and volunteered to take part in his teaching initiatives. Students loved him and awarded him the highest marks for his teaching. Although I would not like to belittle the contributions of my other colleagues in the Department of Pathology, I am sure that we would all agree that it is Marin Nola who deserves the most credit for restoring the pre-

eminence of pathology in Zagreb and for bringing this specialty to the position that it had occupied under Professor Saltykow, when the Zagreb Medical School was in its infancy. Marin's name became the synonym for the pathology course in Zagreb and his colleagues in Split, Rijeka, and Osijek emulated him in their medical schools.

Marin's teaching activities did not end in the classroom and, literally, one can say that he lived through and for pathology. He wrote papers about teaching of pathology, studied the exam questions, and made numerous innovations, most of which were enthusiastically accepted by the students. He loved to talk about teaching and in his emails he constantly bombarded me with new ideas on how to improve the teaching of pathology and thus help students to become better physicians. At the time of his death, just to give an example, he was constructing a "question bank for professors," designed to cover all aspects of pathology and containing at least 5000 questions that had been previously validated in Croatia and the US. Will anybody take his files or are these questions lost for ever?

A major impetus to Marin's activities was the invitation to join me and Professor Stanko Jukić in editing the second edition of the Croatian textbook of pathology. He jumped at

the opportunity to help us out and took full responsibility for transforming this average book into a first-class textbook. I have worked in publishing for quite some time and I have met a lot of enthusiastic and hard working people in this field. However, I have never encountered anybody who took his task as seriously as Marin. The final editing of that second edition of *Patologija* took place in my home in Kansas in April of 2007. Thus, I had the opportunity to observe Marin working on it for months. He slept not more than 3-4 hours a day and worked over 20 hours a day. I was speechless and a bit ashamed for not being able to keep pace with him, but he remained undaunted, convinced that this must be done and that the book must be in the hands of his students by the beginning of the 2007/2008 academic year. And true to his promise to himself and his students, it was completed and printed – I still do not know how. At the end, he persuaded me to include his favorite quote, that supposedly he had heard for the first time from me, into the preface. It is a line from Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*: "*We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.*" Was there ever another pathologist who would have chosen that quote? I guess only Marin could have done it, be-

cause he who was always looking at the stars.

Once the Croatian textbook of pathology was completed and printed in September of 2007, Marin immediately started working on a study guide to accompany the textbook. The goal was to produce a companion book which would help students to prepare better for the exams, but also to stimulate them to study during the entire school year, and thus master pathology gradually step by step. This manual (*Patologija-priručnik za pripremu ispita*, in Croatian) was completed also in a record time, less than a year after the main textbook. By a somber coincidence, the book was sent to the printer the same day that Marin died. In its preface we included yet another quote which Marin liked, this one from William James, the famous American psychologist: "*Act as what you do makes a difference. It does.*" Dear Marin, I would add in the postscript – what you did made a huge difference. I can assure you.

The Croatian textbook and the manual that he edited, but also wrote to a large extent, and the teaching system that he championed were adopted in other three Medical Schools in Croatia. We are fortunate that the leaders of the new generation of pathologists in Croatia – Sven Seiwerth, Damir Babić, Božo Krušlin (Zagreb), Nives Jonjić (Rijeka), Šime Anđelinović and

Snježana Tomić (Split), and Branko Dmitrović (Osijek) are more or less of the same age as Marin, and that they were, so to say, on the same page with him. I am sure that they will continue his work. I am also sure that the teachers of pathology in the neighboring countries will continue the collaborations that Marin has initiated. Ermina Iljazović of Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH), has not only adopted the Croatian textbook, but has already contributed to the writing of the manual. Živka Eri of Novi Sad, Serbia, has mobilized her colleagues and has already translated both Croatian books into Serbian. Svjetlana Radović of Sarajevo has adopted the book and has invited Marin to help her teach in Sarajevo, BH. Snježana Tomić is using the same textbook and manual for teaching students in Mostar, BH. I have probably forgotten to mention all his contacts and activities, but there were so many that it was impossible to keep track of all of them. Even those that I have listed here will, I trust, assure that Marin Nola's efforts were not in vain. He has touched the lives of so many and most of them in a positive way. His works and printed words will outlive him and remain as a living memory of this modest and yet incredibly influential man. *Verba volant scripta manent.*

This article, which I am writing with tears in my eyes, would

not be complete without mentioning Marin Nola as a physician and pathologist. At the suggestion of Professor Boris Labar, Professor Jukić has sent Marin to study hematopathology with Dr Dennis Weisenburger, Omaha, Nebraska. Within 2-3 years after returning from Nebraska, Marin completely revamped the approach to hematopathology at the Zagreb University Hospital Center and became an indispensable member of their clinical hematology team. He even saw patients on a regular basis and spoke with many of them trying to help them understand their hematological problems. He really remained true to his Hippocratic oath and will remain as an idol for future generations of clinician-pathologists. He did it all promptly and with a smile, keeping in mind the Corneille's verse that the manner in which it is given is worth more than the gift itself. And he gave a lot, maybe even a bit too much, of himself.

Marin's influence was felt not only in Zagreb but in all other medical centers in Croatia and even abroad. For example, together with me and Juan Rosai he wrote an important companion book/study guide for the leading textbook of surgical pathology – Rosai and Ackerman's Surgical Pathology Review. It has been widely read and used all over the world; within a year of its publication two reprint editions had to be produced

because of the high demand. In the period immediately before his death, he started working with his colleagues from the neighboring countries on improving hematopathology services in the region. A young pathologist from Estonia and one from Serbia were scheduled to study with Marin in Zagreb. He was also a member of the European Bone Marrow Pathology group, where he closely worked with Emina Torlaković, another Zagreb Medical School graduate and superstar, currently working in Canada. With Živko Pavletić, Croatian physician scientist now working at the National Institutes of Health, he organized Croatia-USA collaboration in the field of postgraduate medical education. Marin corresponded with pathologists from all over Europe and was planning to form an international group of lymphoma experts for Eastern Europe. He was the Croatian contact person with the United States-Canadian Academy of Pathology, from which he constantly received slides and teaching material for

distribution in the region. Together with a leading Czech pathologist Dr Michal Michal, a great Panslavist who has helped us all a lot, he organized sending many young Croatian pathologists to Plzen – with all expenses paid! Marin loved Croatia and did all he could to translate that love into deeds.

He also helped preparing this issue of the *Croatian Medical Journal* for the Fourth Croatian Congress of Pathology and Forensic Medicine. Although he was indefatigable, the fate unfortunately had other plans in mind for him. As the old Croatian saying goes: “*Čovjek snuje a bog odlučuje*.” (in translation: Man dreams but God decides). Our mutual friend, Janez Janovec of Ljubljana, a member of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and a co-organizer of the Kansas Histopathology Club (to which Marin also belonged), in a response to my note about Marin’s death sent me a short poem of Salvatore Quasimodo: “*Ognuno sta solo sul cuore della terra/traffito da un raggio di sole/ ed e subito sera*” (translation “Ev-

ery individual stands alone at the heart of the world/transfixed by a ray of sunlight; and suddenly it is evening”) So true. In the darkness of the night that had descended upon me, I could not but include it here.

Marin leaves behind his wife Alida, his daughter Iva, and his son Mario. I lost a good friend but they lost a devoted husband and father, which is an incomparably greater and irreplaceable loss. My condolences and love to them as well to Marin’s parents. We will all miss him greatly. As my wife Andrea said, life goes on but without Marin, for many of us, it will be a much different one than before, while he was still around.

My dear Marin, my dearest friend, may your body rest in peace in your beloved Podgora on the Adriatic, that meant so much to you. For your tomb, instead of flowers, here is a verse from Lord Byron:

*Fare thee well! And if for ever,
Still for ever, fare thee well.*

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