

Beginnings of the Church of the Nazarene in Croatia

by Howard Culbertson

The story begins with Dan Psaute's annual summertime visits to that area of the former Yugoslavia beginning in 1982. His burden for the Balkans became increasingly heavier with each visit that he made. In the beginning he was on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ. Then, he took a teaching position at what is now European Nazarene College.

About 1990 a young Croatian named Goran Medved began dreaming of spending his final year in high school in the U.S. as an exchange student. He applied to the exchange student program in the spring of 1991 but then began thinking that his oral skills in English were too limited. As he waited for an answer to his application he began looking around for a way to improve them. One day in early summer he saw an advertisement in the newspaper offering a month of one-on-one conversational English practice with American speakers. He went to the orientation meeting. It was a group of Church of Christ young people from Brownwood, TX who were using the gospel of Mark as the text. That was a bit startling to Goran because he was an atheist. However, he wanted to improve his English skills, so he went through the program. Though impressed by their deep spirituality, he didn't respond in any way.

In late summer Goran got an acceptance letter from the exchange student program. He saw that he would be going to live with a family in Brownwood, TX. -- a town where he already had some friends! During that year as a high school student in Brownwood, those Church of Christ people he had already met in Croatia loved him into the Kingdom.

Goran Medved was a good soccer player and during that senior year, he was offered a scholarship to play soccer at Central College, a two-year school now called Central Christian College of Kansas. So, in the fall of 1992 he went to that small school in McPherson, Kansas to play soccer. During first year there, his team was playing at a tournament in Tulsa, OK. SNU's soccer coach was at the tournament looking for junior college transfers. He was impressed enough by Goran to offer him a scholarship to come and play for SNU for his final three years of college.

Goran arrived in Bethany in the fall of 1993 -- coincidentally the year that we were recruiting the very first of several groups of volunteers that would go from SNU to spend a year in Bulgaria laying the groundwork for Nazarene work in that country.

In the spring of 1994 Goran was in my General Education Christian Thought class. In the spring of 1995 he was in my General Education Ministry, Church and Society class. Somewhere during Goran's time at SNU I decided to improve my Spanish skills a bit so Goran and I wound up being fellow students in an intermediate Spanish class. He graduated in the spring of 1996.

In the fall of 1997 I began a year's sabbatical from SNU. In late September Barbara and I left for Europe where we planned to spend about 5 months and then return to the U.S. to do some other things. After we had been there about a month the Southern Europe Field Director Duane Srader and General Superintendent Jerry Porter asked me to assume duties as district superintendent of the Italy North district. That wound up keeping me in Europe for 9 months rather than the planned 5.

One Friday in mid-March, 1998 Duane Srader asked me if SNU would consider recruiting and helping place volunteers in Croatia to help open Nazarene work there. He said they didn't have any contacts there, but he just felt it was the right time. He mentioned Dan Psaute and said he would likely be the supervisor for the team while still continuing some of his work at European Nazarene College. I told Duane I thought we would be interested. Among other things we were about to celebrate SNU's centennial and I thought it would be fitting for us to have a special missions project that year.

On Thursday of the following week -- March 18 -- I received an e-mail from Goran Medved saying he had found my e-mail address on the SNU website and just wanted to say "hi." He noted that he was back in Croatia. He said he had gone back home to work for the government but had already become disillusioned with that and was now working as assistant pastor in his local church. When I responded to Goran's e-mail, I told him about Duane's request and said we would likely be following through on it. I casually mentioned that I was spending a few months in Italy. Goran's response on March 25 reminded me that Croatia was next door to Italy and that I ought to come check things out. He said he had already talked to his home church board (the Church of Christ in Zagreb) and that they had committed to doing everything they possibly could to help the Church of the Nazarene enter their country.

I got in touch with Dan Psaute. We began comparing schedules with Goran and decided that we would make a trip together to Zagreb in early July of 1998.

Dan came down from Switzerland on the train and I caught a 4:30 a.m. train out of Milan in order to meet him in Zagreb! We spent 4 or 5 days, staying with Goran and his grandmother (his parents were up in Germany working at the time). We visited with some missionaries who gave us a discouraging report ("Croatia is becoming known as the graveyard of missionary dreams," they said). We were with Goran's church on Sunday morning and they were extremely encouraging. We also got a chance to see some of their weekday ministries in action. Their pastor begged us to come! It was a great few days in many ways. The 1998 World Cup was on and Croatia played a quarter- or semifinal game while we were there. One important event in that trip was Goran taking us to the top of the stone lookout tower in old Zagreb where we could look out over the entire city. While on top of that tower, the three of us -- Goran, Dan and myself -- held hands and prayed aloud, asking the Lord for guidance and wisdom.

I left Croatia having decided to encourage Field Director Srader to move ahead with plans to plant some churches in Croatia. In discussions with Dan, I agreed that we

would try to recruit 4 young men from SNU to be the first team in there in the spring of 1999.

Back in Italy, I met up with a university Youth in Mission team who were spending eight weeks in Italy that summer. When I returned from Zagreb, I went to Rome where they were to spend their final two weeks before returning to the U.S. One evening we were sitting out in the front yard of the Rome property and I told them about my trip to Croatia. As we headed up to bed later, Jason Lipscomb, leader of that team and who had just graduated from SNU, said to me that he would sit out the spring semester of seminary in order to be on that initial team. When I returned to SNU that fall, we were able to recruit two more (rather than my hoped-for three): Brett Simms and Mark Murray. The three of those left from the Oklahoma City airport in January of 1999. It was, of course, kind of a rocky first year with one of the young men returning home early due to a crisis of faith. It did, however, get us started!

I did get a sense of the kind of hatred between peoples in that area in the fall of 1998 when I spoke in chapel about my visit to Croatia and pleaded for some volunteers to step forward. After that chapel, a Yugoslavian student came by my office to ask how I could dare speak so kindly of the awful Croatsians.

In that fall of 1998 I suddenly realized that there were several connections I had with Croatia. One was that in 1974 when we first went out as missionaries Barbara and I took a freighter to Italy. That freighter was a Yugoslavian vessel (at that time Croatia was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). Then, I remembered Bill Prince in the late 1970's talking about a trip he had made to Communist Yugoslavia when he was serving as the head of European Nazarene College. Thirdly, in the summer of 1994 Barbara and I had gone to Italy to celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary. Because we would be renting a car, we picked up a map of Italy at the AAA office in Oklahoma City. That map had Italy on one side of it and Croatia on the other side! I spent part of the summer of 1996 in Caracas, Venezuela. While there I watched the NBA championship series (with the announcer speaking Spanish!) in which "Croatian Sensation" Toni Kukoc played a leading roll in the Chicago Bulls conquest of the winner's trophy.