



Vignettes on the Ervin G Erdős's visit to Yugoslavia

Kratke priče o poseti Ervina G. Erdosa Jugoslaviji

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This article includes my personal reminiscences on the great American scientist Ervin G. Erdős (1922–2019) who was born in Budapest. He got his MD in Munich in 1952, and worked there, as a research fellow with Eugen Werle who discovered kallikrein¹. When Erdős came to the USA, he continued to work on peptides and peptidases at the universities of Pittsburgh, Oklahoma City, Dallas and Chicago. His discoveries on enzymes that generate and inactivate various biologically active peptides contributed to our understanding of the renin-angiotensin and kallikrein-kinin systems^{2,3}. I collaborated with him during the period of almost half century, and I often worked in Dr. Erdős's research laboratories in Oklahoma City, Dallas, and Chicago. He visited me in Sarajevo, as a Fulbright Visiting Professor⁴. Among other research findings, we discovered angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) in the retina, that opened up a new research direction for many scientists interested in ocular diseases^{5,6}. We shared research interests through visits across the Atlantic between the former Yugoslavia and the United States.

In the following very short stories, the American Professor Ervin G. Erdős is presented as an American Professor, and the author of this article as his host companion.

One day in the nineteen seventy-six, an American Professor arrived at the Zagreb airport. He had been invited by a colleague to visit the University of Sarajevo. On this particular day, he and several other passengers passed through passport control without anyone noticing. All airport employees were distracted by watching their national team compete in a soccer match on TV.

The Professor stayed in Sarajevo for three weeks as a Fulbright Visiting Professor, where he was a consultant and

lecturer at the medical school. His hosts had arranged for him to visit Split, Sombor, and Belgrade afterwards, to show off the beauty of their country. During these side trips, he had many interesting encounters that he would later relate to his colleagues back home in Dallas and Chicago. He especially liked to retell the story on the police chief in Split, Sombor market, visit to charda, and peasant household in Ravno Selo. Some of his stories are presented in the following vignettes.

The Professor and his host companion from Sarajevo drove toward Split and did some sightseeing in Dalmatia. An unexpected problem arose in Split when the reception desk clerk at his hotel noticed that the Professor's passport lacked a seal with the date of his entry into the country. A summons to the police department (the SUP) followed. His host companion immediately called a colleague from Split to come, and these two fellows accompanied the Professor to the SUP. The head of the city police read to them aloud an extract from the Law about foreigners. The companion translated in English the statement that a person who enters the country illegally must leave within 24 hours. "But I arrived in Zagreb on a practically empty plain," the Professor said. "And I with other passengers passed through passport control without anyone noticing because all the employees at that time were watching the Yugoslav national team compete in a soccer match." The head of the SUP digested this information with little effect. The young man from Split then spoke up. "Look here; this is a distinguished scientist with a worldwide reputation. He is a man of integrity, and I would personally guarantee for him as a citizen of split." Again, this plea fell upon deaf ears. The man from Split argued passionately, but the head of the SUP was resolute. The host companion could see

that they were at an impasse—there seemed to be no hope of a positive resolution. Then he had an idea, and he remarked: “After visiting Split, the Professor is invited to Sombor to stay for two days in Tito’s villa. He will lecture there to a select audience of doctors and scientists from the Vojvodina Province.”

As the host companion had hoped, his reference to the Yugoslavian president had an immediate impact. The SUP head started to apologize to the Professor for having kept him for so long, and offered drinks all around. Although they politely declined the drinks, the Professor was much amused by that sudden burst of hospitality. The truth was that the University of Sarajevo had arranged for him to stay in a beautiful villa owned by the municipality of Sombor. This property originally belonged to Tito’s Deputy President, Aleksandar Ranković, and when he lost his position, the villa was retained for use by distinguished guests.

The Professor stayed two nights in Sombor. As promised, he addressed a group of local doctors and selected professors from the Medical School in Novi Sad. As in other places in Yugoslavia, he visited the local market where all the country folk gathered to sell and buy their produce. There was much material for his camera in the markets, especially since that particular Friday was a big market day in Sombor. As usual, the market scene was an impressive medley of people, products, and languages and cultures. In addition to the dialects of Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, other languages could be heard. Even before daybreak, more than a hundred people from the neighboring villages began to arrive with their goods, disturbing the quiet of the still sleeping little town. The din of cars and vans, complete with the rattle of wagons and the cries of people. The pre-dawn commotion soon gave way to the bustle of citizens appearing by the dozens to purchase the various local goods on display, ranging from the fresh country produce to small farm animals. There were manufactured goods available and supplied by artisans and factories from different parts of Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, and Italy. Sombor Cheese is one of the best known homemade products of the region. This delicate cheese is made from whole milk and is sold in small vats weighing 5–10 lbs. There is a widely circulated story that Sir Winston Churchill was so fond of the Sombor Cheese, that a package of cheese was regularly forwarded to him.

One evening, the Professor was invited by his host companion to drive to Apatin for dinner. A half hour’s drive took the Professor and some friends to a charming charda on

the Danube. The name charda comes from the Hungarian language; it refers to any one of the small, pleasant restaurants located along the river featuring good local food and drink and the music of Tsigani, or Gypsy, musicians. The guests could also participate in folk dances, such as the czardash. This dance from the Carpathian basin originated in the homeland of the legendary Count Dracula, who became known in the literature as a vampire. (Vampire is one of the very few words by which, according to W.W. Skeat’s Etymological dictionary, the Serbian language has enriched the English language.)

That night the charda served fish paprikash, roasted carp, homemade noodles, and Žilavka, the famous wine from the Mostar region. The headwaiter invited the Professor and his guests to see how the paprikash was prepared. At least twenty small kettles were suspended on chains over an open fire. The chief cook pointed out the one in which their stew was cooking. Meanwhile, a dozen Gypsy musicians played Serbian, Hungarian, and Gypsy songs on violins, tamburitzas, and contrabasses. As the meal was ending, the orchestra leader approached the Professor’s table to play and sing according to particular requests. It was clear that they regarded his visit as a great honor.

After his stay in Sombor, the Professor and his host companion stopped in Ravno Selo to visit his host guides’s relatives where he could see a typical home in the village of Vojvodina. The Professor was amazed not only by their tidy house with its large, well-ordered garden, a tractor, and other farm equipment, but also by the fact that they had a telephone in the house. His reaction to see the telephone was not surprising, because even as late as more than 40 years ago, a telephone was a rarity in many parts of the world, including villages of Europe.

On Tuesday, November 12th, 2019 Dr. Erd’s called me. He invited me for a visit and at the very end, added: “Rajko, despite my bad condition, on some days, I feel quite well, and I would like to go with you out to a café.” I knew that his poor health was not good enough for that, so I decided to visit him instead. I would make him some Turkish coffee, just like we often did when he visited my laboratory in Sarajevo as a Fulbright Visiting Professor⁷.

The next day Ervin went to the hospital for a scheduled appointment, but unfortunately, he did not return home. His condition suddenly worsened, and he died two days later, on Sunday, 17 November 2019. He was 97 years old.

R E F E R E N C E S

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