



# Zagreb 2005

## CEESA Conference, Croatia

*March 17*

### **Off to the Conference**

Due to its relatively close distance (229 miles), our school was able to send a large number of its teachers to the CEESA (Central and Eastern European Schools Association) conference in Zagreb, Croatia. After school, we all boarded the bus at the nearest road wide enough to handle a coach bus. With tote bags full of snacks (we wouldn't stop for food), we were prepared to undertake the approximately 7-hour journey.

### **Countryside**

Once outside of Belgrade, the hills gave way to flat land. The open rural land was a stark contrast to the city of over 1,500,000 people. Although the temperature was spring-like, the brownness and bare trees still reflected the recent winter snowfalls. Water was standing in some fields that likely were covered by snow just a week earlier. When I remarked that some of the fields were already plowed, the local teachers remarked that this was unusually late, due to the "long" winter. If only the winters in Wisconsin were that short! A few small tractors worked up the rich land. Small villages dotted the land, with their terra-cotta tiled roofs and orthodox spires emerging from the skyline. Although I spotted a few sheep, their small numbers and absence of olive trees was evidence that I was not in Tunisia.

Upon reaching the border, we all showed our passports to pass from Serbia and into Croatia. Local teachers commented on how different it had been a little over a decade ago, when the region was



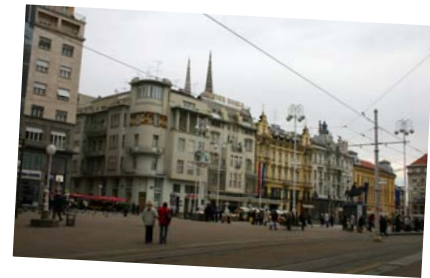
known as Yugoslavia. As it became dark, the movie “The Last Samurai” was played, subtitled in Serbian. As we approached the outskirts of Zagreb, a police car escorted us the rest of the way to the hotel. Although we didn’t see this as a necessary measure, it assured that no hostilities would occur to the Belgrade-licensed bus. Even today, there is still resentment between some Croats and Serbs.

*Friday, March 18*

### **City tour**

After the conference sessions were over for the day, many conference-goers boarded busses to begin the tour of the city and the host school, the American International School of Zagreb. The school, formerly a Catholic seminary, certainly was larger than our rather homey campuses in Belgrade. After a quick tour of the school and its crafts exhibits, interested parties boarded the buses to begin the city tour. Even though we didn’t travel very far, maneuvering the narrow, rather congested one-way streets made traveling by bus take longer than it probably would have if we had walked. Trams seemed to be the other sensible transportation method used by many residents.

Interspersed throughout the old part of the city were buildings dating back to the late 1800’s. This reconstruction occurred after a disastrous earthquake that demolished many of its Baroque structures. Some of these older buildings appeared to be recently restored, while others were in a state of neglect. Several of the prominent buildings were painted in various hues of yellow, beautifully contrasting the blue sky of the spring day. Graffiti was scrawled over the bottom level of many buildings.



### **Ban Josip Jelačić Square**

Driving past the famous Mirogoj Cemetery, our first stop was the Ban Josip Jelačić Square. In the central part of the square was a prominent columnar monument, with a golden statue of Mary facing the cathedral and several golden angels surrounding the base. The sculptures were especially beautiful as they glowed in the setting sun. We had a few minutes to peek into the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, a part of Zagreb’s visual identity with its Neo-Gothic twin spires. Next to the cathedral was a fortified-looking conical tower, with a gate that used to be the Kaptoľ’s southern entrance.



As they glowed in the setting sun. We had a few minutes to peek into the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, a part of Zagreb’s visual identity with its Neo-Gothic twin spires. Next to the cathedral was a fortified-looking conical tower, with a gate that used to be the Kaptoľ’s southern entrance.

## Croatian Dining

At the conference there was a signup sheet to go to restaurants selected by the school in Zagreb. Even though the Chinese food sounded tempting, I decided it was only proper that I sampled local Croatian cuisine. One of the teaching couples from our school also signed up for the restaurant, even though she originally was from Croatia. Departing from the hotel, we walked in to the pleasant evening temperature.

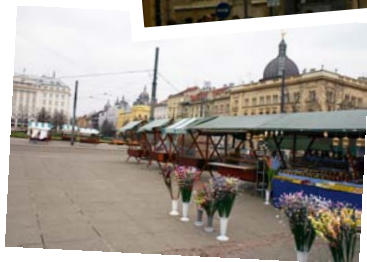
I was surprised at how quiet the streets seemed; there wasn't the lively atmosphere of the downtown walking street of Belgrade. There were, however, some fancier sports cars showing off at high speed - something I hadn't seen in a while. Of course, I don't think any Yugo cars will do much speed racing anyway! Signs were all in the modified Latin script, making Croatian much easier to read than the Cyrillic dominating the otherwise similar Serbian language.

At the restaurant, a large table had been reserved for us. Surprisingly, the restaurant wasn't all that smoky. The group dined on mixed meat platters, which were quite similar to what I've eaten in Belgrade. Drinks consisted of Croatian *pivo* (beer) or wine from the country. After the late meal some went to a jazz club, while others walked back to the hotel, tired after a long day of conference sessions.

*Saturday, March 19*

## Upper Town

After conference sessions on Saturday, I departed the hotel with a few other teachers and headed towards the street where we heard people were selling Easter-related



and other crafts. Many of the vendors had already packed up for the weekend, but we did get to see some of the ceramics (hand-made and moulded), handmade jewelry, and painted eggs. I had enough money to buy a painted wooden egg and charming tiny porcelain bishop figurine.

Determined to see St. Mark's Church, whose multi-colored coat-of-arms tiled roof was featured on the cover of the conference program, I headed onward in spite of the continually graying sky. Walk-



ing up the steps next to the funicular railway (built in 1891), I went past the famous Lotrščak Tower and its rooftop canon which has faithfully fired for over 100 years exactly at noon. I now had a beautiful view of the Lower Town. Church steeples interspersed throughout the city peeked through the skyline.

Nearby, a young wedding couple posed by the stairs and a street performer played the guitar. Drawn by the steeple of St. Marks, I walked on. Older women carrying bouquets of flowers walked away from the church, now at the end of the narrow street. A Croa-

tian flag proudly waved from the side of one of the older buildings. Although the sky wasn't blue, St. Mark's was still impressive. Unlike the decorative roof, the inside was rather simple. After enjoying my walk through the Upper Town, I headed back to the hotel in time for supper.

*Sunday, March 20*

### **Palm Sunday**

Determined to see a bit more of the city before our bus left, I went for a morning walk. Nearly all shops were closed and the streets were quiet. Men and women stopped at flower stands in city squares to purchase fresh bouquets of spring flowers. I also noticed more and more people carrying a green, non-flowered plant, which I then realized was an olive branch bundled with what looked like pussy willows. Outside some churches, I observed some selling piles of olive branches. The sound of church bells tolling enriched the festive morning.

Although I wasn't following a map, the relatively grid-like layout, combined with the landmarks of prominent buildings, statues, and grassy boulevards, made it fairly easy to maintain one's sense of direction. Once the spring flowers were planted and things greened up, I'm sure these areas would be quite lovely. I am looking forward to the same in Belgrade.

### **Back to Belgrade**

The police car once again escorted us out of the city, where once again the flat plowed lands dominated. As we neared the border, the lengthy queue of semis (many from Turkey) was quite astonishing. Thankfully we didn't have to wait in *that* line. Back in Belgrade, things were unpacked and preparations began for school for the following day.