

Dr. Srecko Pogacar: From a castle in Slovenia to a clinic in RI

DR. MARA POPOVIC

(The following are excerpts from an article which first appeared in the Medical Chamber of Slovenia's magazine.)

Srecko, good day! I am pleased that after a long time I see you again in Ljubljana. We have gotten together for the purpose of the interview and to give Slovenian doctors a chance to meet their compatriot, who started in Slovenia and then continued his life and professional career in the USA.

In our conversations, you mentioned that you lived in the castle of Ljubljana.

Yes, that was the best part of my life. My father was a railroad worker and when he was transferred to Ljubljana, they assigned him an apartment in the castle of Ljubljana, with a magnificent view of the city and mountains in the background. There were many residents and there was always something, sometimes slightly mysterious, happening. In the attic of the castle we, the children of the castle, found the statue of the Emperor Franz Joseph, which in the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, we learned later, stood in front of the castle.

I recall the 4th of April 1941 was a beautiful, sunny day. My mom and I sat on a bench on Wild Chestnuts Avenue on the castle hill and watched, as if in a movie, how the German stukas (planes) bombed the airport near Ljubljana. This was the start of the World War II for us Slovenians. When I was 13, the Italians occupied the castle and not long after that, we were evicted.

I assume you finished high school in Ljubljana and enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine?

Since I was a child I wanted to be a doctor. When I played with my sister, she was a nurse and I was a doctor.



From the left: Drs. Danilo Tavcar, Mara Popovic, Marija Tavcar and Srecko Pogacar at an international conference on neuropathology in Stockholm.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MARA POPOVIC

She became the head nurse in the mental hospital in Polje near Ljubljana and I became a lecturer on neurology and neuropathology at Harvard and clinical associate professor of pathology at Brown University.

After you graduated from the Medical School in Ljubljana, you specialized in neuropsychiatry?

From the beginning I wanted to become a neurologist, but I couldn't get the specialization. Therefore, I went to the Ministry of Health and talked to the minister, telling him that if I don't get the specialization in neurology, I will go to Bosnia or Serbia, where they were looking for doctors, who wanted to specialize provided that they would stay with them for three years after they finish. He was friendly and told me that

I should wait for a while. A few days later I got the message: "You have the specialization in neurology."

You also studied neuropathology in other European countries and Russia?

Yes, I studied at the National Hospital for Neurological Diseases in London. It has a neuropathological museum. This was a good opportunity to learn about rare neurological diseases. Then I studied at the Neuropathology Institute in Warsaw and finally, I spent time at the Institut Mozga (Brain Research Institute) in Moscow, which was established by the Ministry of Health in Moscow in order to investigate Lenin's brain.

The Ministry had invited Professor Oskar Vogt, founder of the Institute for Brain Research in Berlin, to found



SLOVENSKI ETNOGRAFSKI MUZEJ

Postcard from 1941 of the castle in Ljubljana, Slovenia, where Dr. Pogacar spent his early boyhood in housing assigned to his father, a railroad worker.

it. His work was on investigating the link between neurocellular changes and individual psychological characteristics. This was a sincere desire on the Ministry's part to discover the secrets of Lenin's brain – or a pretext to get the money to build the Institute. Allegedly, Dr. Vogt found an increased number of “large nerve cells” in Lenin's brain.

Harvard Professor Raymond Adams visited Dr. Vogt in 1951; he showed him the histological slides of Lenin's brain. The only thing the experienced neuropathologist Dr. Adams could detect were vascular-ischemic lesions. Apparently, Lenin had died demented.

You eventually went to the USA. How did this happen?

I was single, slightly adventurous, and curious about the world. The chairman

of the department of pathology where I was working received a letter from Dr. Mario Nicotra, the director of the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) and the Rhode Island Medical Center (RIMC). They were looking for a neuropathologist to teach neuroanatomy and neuropathology. Since I was the only neuropathologist in Slovenia, he handed me the letter. I quickly accepted the offer. On the 12th of October, 1965, the day of Christopher Columbus, I arrived at the airport in Providence.

Why you were invited to the USA?

The USA lacked neuropathologists. Besides, they paid me less than a neuropathologist trained in the USA. Also, they needed a neuropathologist for the approval of their psychiatry residency program.

I know you returned to Ljubljana with the idea to do neuropathology in Ljubljana.

After two years of working abroad, I returned with a plan to resume my work at the neurological clinic. I thought I owed something to my country. Upon arrival, there was no more neuropathology laboratory at the neurological clinic. The pathologists had appropriated the equipment and there was no technician either. I got the feeling that nobody expected that I was coming back. To be realistic, I shouldn't expect that anybody would wait for me for two years. So I returned to the USA, married and raised a family.

Did you marry an American woman?

No, I married an Armenian lady. My wife Aida and Paula, the wife of another

physician, were attending English courses together. Paula thought that I needed female company, so she asked me if I wanted to meet Aida, her attractive friend. Admittedly, I was overloaded by teaching, but female company I didn't avoid. My answer was short and without detours: "Yes." I called Aida. This had serious consequences; I married her.

Srecko, at the same time that you worked in Rhode Island, you became a lecturer in neurology and neuropathology at Harvard. Tell me how this came about?

I was part of the activities at the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) and Boston City Hospital, neurology departments, bringing interesting and well worked-up cases from RIMC to MGH and Boston City. Their doctors used to come as main discussers to RIMC. So did the dean of the Brown Medical

School, Dr. Stanley Aronson, an individual with the most extensive knowledge of medicine, neurology, neuropathology and the history of medicine. The most interesting cases were published. I think I was the right person at the right time to become a lecturer on neuropathology and neurology at Harvard.

At Brown University Dr. Aronson was a decisive factor; additionally my bibliography was at that time more extensive. So, I became clinical associate professor of pathology at Brown University.

How long were you head of neuropathology at RIMC?

From 1965 to 1990, when I retired from RIMC. In 1967, I had become seriously interested in psychiatry and in 1975 I passed the Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and was certified. We, my wife Aida and I, bought a building, rebuilt it

as the Pogacar Clinic and opened private practices – I, in neurology and psychiatry and Aida, in general dentistry. I was admitted to the staff of the Kent County Memorial Hospital where I was served for several years as the chief of the psychiatry department.

In 1984 we sold the Pogacar Clinic. Now I am working several days a week and limit my practice to psychiatry. My wife and I have two sons and grandchildren. My son Andre is a TV editor in New York, and my other son Peter is a pediatrician in a group practice, 15 minutes from Pogacar Clinic.

Srecko, I am very glad that we had opportunity to walk through your life.

Mara, thank you very much for the interesting questions. ❖



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