

Memories: Professor Budimac, my Colleague and Beloved Friend

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A Timeline of a Sincere Friendship

It was a long time ago, in June 1991. The country was torn apart at the seams, but the young enthusiasts from Novi Sad decided to organize STINF (Savezno Takmičenje iz InFormatike, N.B. Federal competition in computing for secondary school students) for the last time. I came alone with my small team, tired from a long and exhausting journey. I didn't know where I was, so I headed directly to the Faculty Computer Center. I was met at the door by a young, charming colleague with a cheerful haircut and informal demeanor. He said his name is Zoran. To this day, I still remember his irresistible smile that enchanted me from the very beginning. I suddenly felt like I was at home and started the conversation with a "serious" question: "Is Sečuan (first Chinese restaurant in former Yugoslavia Republic) as good as it used to be?". The answer was: "I guess, let's wait for my wife and then go and try it."

STINF ended, we didn't exchange business cards (it was very popular at the time, but we didn't care too much about the formalities), so there was a danger that we would never meet again. However, a few weeks later we found ourselves at the ITI conference in Cavtat (Croatia). That's how our reunion actually started. We were happy to see each other again and started hanging out at long breakfast at the hotel Croatia, at scientific sessions, and at long after work snacks with frozen white wine at the Konavoka restaurant.

At that time, I was already doing a lot of experiments for my doctoral thesis, but I still didn't have a formal supervisor, especially since my prospective supervisor Branko Souček from Zagreb suddenly fled to Italy. When I mentioned it to Zoran and Mira, they immediately suggested that they could find a solution for me. They attended my conference presentations and got the idea with whom to connect me. For the first time, we exchanged our phone numbers. A few days later, I was on my way to Novi Sad again and started working with professor Surla, who agreed to be my supervisor.

The period of socializing with Zoran and Mira began: Ohrid, Novi Sad, Skopje, Novi Sad again and so on. We started visiting Sečuan regularly, on a mutual joy. We also went to the Miki restaurant in the village of Peštani, where we ate the famous Ohrid trout and drank brandy with a pear in a bottle (Zoran always wondered how they raised the fruit to become ripe and big), after which Mira and I swam for a long, long time, leaving Zoran to enjoy his solitude.

In the spring 1992, the sanctions against Serbia started, so it was almost impossible to visit each other. Still, I remember Mira's and Zoran's joint birthdays in Novi Sad in December 1991. That unforgettable birthday deepened our acquaintance and companionship.

At the end of the summer of 1993, ETAI Conference was held in Ohrid, so most of the teachers from Novi Sad decided to travel abroad for the first time. It was the best time to organize my PhD defence. The defence ended, and so ended the conference. The four of us: Zoran, Mira, Vlado (my husband) and I continued hanging out in Ohrid for a few more days. Released from any obligations, we visited the beaches, ate trout (the whole apartment smelled of fried fish for days), and in the evenings we sat in the bars, wading our bare feet in the lake. Zoran asked me from time to time to offer him a ritual cigarette, to which Mira reacted sharply and was angry that I was leading him to vices. Nevertheless, she silently tolerated my small misbehaviour, because we had already established a friendly relationship that no one could disturb.

From the beginning of 1995 to the middle of 1997, Ana, Jakov, Viktor and Tara were born, so at least Vlado and I rarely traveled. The contacts were kept mainly online.

In March 1999, the NATO bombing of Serbia began. Zoran published his famous "Newsletters" almost every day, we waited with trepidation and impatience for the end of this massacre against innocent citizens. We were all sorry when Zoran announced: "We lost the most" (Most is the Serbian word for bridge, the first casualty of all the wars in Novi Sad), and cried a lot when Zoran's assistant Aleksandar Popović was killed, a few days before the end of the bombing.

In the summer of 2000, we were again together on vacation in Ohrid, now eight of us (Zoran, Mira, our four toddlers and I) on weekdays, and with Vlado on weekends. We turned the small apartment into a large bedroom and enjoyed every day together. Zoran sacrificed himself and slept on an inflatable mattress, which made the kids jealous. Regardless of the anxiety of living conditions, Zoran's charm and enthusiasm made us all happy.

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At the end of 2000, Zoran offered me to join the DAAD project proposal with Humboldt University. I agreed with pleasure. The project was approved and in February 2001, Zoran and I went to Berlin together. Zoran introduced me to Klaus Bothe and spent days showing me the city and its amazing museums. We floated here and there, I remember how long it took us to get to the Egyptian Museum (now part of the Neues Museum, but at that time in Charlottenburg, in the middle of nowhere) and to the canal where Rosa Luxemburg was thrown. Of course, he also took me to Kreuzberg, to which usually very calm Klaus reacted violently. I fell in love with Berlin thanks to Zoran. He didn't managed to get me hooked on Radler, which he drank during the breaks from work. I envied him for the soups he prepared in our office and never shared with me.

The DAAD project was a great success, so we got together often, and on two occasions we were again in Ohrid together with our four children and the entire consortium. The kids were hanging out at the hotel, we were working and everyone was happy and satisfied. I soon got acquainted with the software engineering course and its sexy slides (that's how Hussein Zedan from DeMontfort University, whom I met later, called them). Shortly after, the software engineering course became one of my key subjects, which I still teach today.

The DAAD project was the inspiration for the Tempus project "Joint M.Sc. Curriculum in Software Engineering" which started in 2004. Since the fall of 2006, every winter I was visiting Novi Sad three to four times to hold classes and exams for the course "Privacy, ethics, and social responsibilities". The course syllabus was defined at the Hussein's faculty together with Simon Rogerson, one of the founders of computer ethics. In Novi Sad, I held it with the assistance of Zoran Putnik, who for the first time started maintaining it independently just a few days before saying goodbye to us forever.

In December 2010, Zoran and Mira celebrated their 150th anniversary: 2*50 years of life + 2*25 years of marriage. My daughter Ana and I spent a couple of days with Budimac family and attended the big joint celebration. Besides the wonderful party, I remember that Zoran cheerfully told Mira's parents that from now on Mira was more his than theirs (Sada je duže moja nego vaša). I was once again touched by his sincere love for his wife.

The exchange of teachers during joint master was bidirectional. Zoran and Mira were coming to Skopje as guest professors both at the Faculty of Natural Science and Mathematics and from 2011 at the Faculty of Computer Science and Engineering. Students were always fascinated by his direct relationship and looked forward to the next round of lectures.

For us, it was an excellent opportunity for socializing and discovering restaurants in Novi Sad and Skopje. Zoran and Mira took us to several wonderful restaurants in Novi Sad, including very classy ones. We enjoyed socializing everywhere, especially in Gusan. I have the impression that in Skopje Zoran particularly liked Kamin Čamo, where they serve traditional dishes that are prepared that day and brought as soon as you order them.

On September 18, 2012, at the Gala dinner of the Balkan Conference of Informatics in Novi Sad, my sister phoned me that our father had died. That was the worst stress in my life. Although Mira was the chair of the conference and could have continued with the celebration, Zoran and Mira decided to accompany me to the hotel. We walked together for more than an hour. Zoran and I cried inconsolably remembering the last meeting with our fathers. In those moments, Zoran's devastating pain eased mine.

Hussein offered Zoran participation in the NATO project "Trust management system in the network of networks". Considering that Serbia was not eligible, Zoran suggested me as the representative of the region. The project enabled me to meet new colleagues from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

After the end of the extension of the DAAD project, the guest lectures ended and the contacts thinned out. A couple of times, Vlado and I went to celebrate the Budimac family patron Saint Mrata and we were waiting for them to come to ours. Unfortunately, it never came to that.

Our last meeting was in September 2022, when Mira was an invited speaker at ICT Innovations conference in Skoplje. Zoran lost his cane, so he had to move on his own. And, he managed. He joked that he injured his hip in Bulgaria, but that he experienced a miracle in Skopje. A few weeks later, he also lost his spare cane. He estimated that one day those canes would be of inestimable value and that whoever finds them will become rich. If you happen to find one, try to prove it is Zoran's. You will make a fortune.

When Zoran passed away at the end of August last year, we were speechless. Vlado, who never shows emotions in public, could not calm down for days and was literally shaken. Coming to Zoran's funeral was a mission impossible. This text is my last farewell to Zoran, whom we all loved from the bottom of our hearts.

Private Address to Zoran

My dear Zoran,

Thank you for being my great and loyal friend from the first time we met. Thank you for allowing me to be part of your family. Thank you for helping me get out of the professional maze and find a supervisor who was willing to support me when I was helpless. Thank you for including me in your projects and introducing me to colleagues who helped me in my career. Thank you for inspiring me to work by saying: "Ajmo sad, brzo i efikasno" (Let's go now, quickly and efficiently.). Thank you for showing me Berlin and allowing me to love it and visit it often. Thanks for New York too. Thank you for calming my pain when I lost my beloved father. Thank you that every meeting with you was a holiday. Thank you for listening attentively to my ramblings and confessions without complaint. Thank you for always offering me a shoulder to cry on.

You were one and only, a top scientist and a teacher of great charm; an excellent presenter whose performances were an event to remember; a great friend and a joker; a wonderful son, who respected and loved his parents; an amazing father, who treasured and admired his children; but above all a husband who adored his wife, was proud of her and whom he appreciated as an icon from the bottom of his heart.

You will remain in our hearts forever and we will be always proud that we knew you, because people with a pure heart and soul like you are born extremely rarely. You shared your life with us and we are grateful for that. Eternal glory to you, my dearest friend.

Katerina Zdravkova