

*I am Mr Dragisa – the
story of Dragisa Armus and
Blythswood Serbia*



I was brought up as one of three children in my family. My sister is much older than me, about twenty years older, and my earliest memory is of her wedding when I was about five years old. She was living in a nearby village and her husband came from another village about seven kilometres away. The Serbian tradition was that she had to go to her marriage on a horse with her friends helping her. That scene has stayed in my mind. That was about 200 kilometres from where I live now. It is in Kosovo; I was brought up in Kosovo. I now live in Vrnjacka Banja.

My background is Orthodox. I don't remember my mother ever visiting a church but my father, who was a roadman, went about once a year. But as far as I know he never entered the church. There was an event there at Christmas or Easter time and he stood outside the celebration along with



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all the others who did not go inside. He was not very interested in the ceremony, just in being nearby.

Not even one

In 1956, when I was seven years old, I went to school. I liked school even when we had to travel to get there in deep snow in the winter. Very often I didn't have good shoes but I enjoyed school anyway, even with cold wet feet. When I was a child, religion was something that was for the past and there was a totally materialistic view of the world. The slogan we learned was '*There is no God.*' I grew up knowing no Bible stories at all, not even one. Maybe I had seen crucifixes on some historic monasteries but they meant nothing to me, they were just to do with old and pointless traditions.

Once a year we had a holiday on a saint's day and we had to take special bread called Slava cake to the priest to be placed in my home village of Ljevosa. The saint was St John, Slava, and his day was 20th January. I was given a little money to take for the priest's dedication of Slava cake. That was my job. As a child we celebrated Christmas but only with special food. It was not a religious celebration, nothing to do with the birth of Christ. It was the same at Easter. We had painted eggs but didn't know they had anything to do with Jesus rising from the dead.

Deep thoughts

Although we were told nothing about Jesus, in my mind I was thinking about things. It was in the elementary school, before



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middle school, I started thinking that there must be something eternal. I thought a lot about eternity at that time. In my mind, without anybody to tell me, and with no Bible in my hand, I imagined that there must be eternity and also that there is life that is the opposite of eternity. I saw people were dying and my question all the time was: we are here for a time and then is the end, so what about eternity? I seemed to know that eternity is time without end. That was a burden to me because I didn't know how to find an answer.

I heard from my mother that I had six brothers and sisters whom I never saw. They died because there was at that time all kind of diseases that children caught. They lived one year or two years, and all before I was born. That was why I was such a small child at the time of my sister's marriage. Perhaps it was knowing about my dead brothers and sisters that put thoughts of eternity in my mind when I was too young to really think about these things.

School was solid; it was strict. The teacher disciplined us by hitting us with a special stick. You had to stretch your hands out and the teacher would strike. It was normal; it was not good. I was from a village and the teacher knew my mother. She ordered her wooden stick from my mother and I was obliged to take it to the classroom. With that stick I was often struck and I didn't like it. That was normal and accepted then. It does not happen now.

My middle school was the school of economics. I liked typography – machine typing without looking. I was good at that work. We also studied economy but that was not



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special. Our eight years of elementary school was followed by middle school for four years. After that came the time to make big decisions about life.

Searching for truth

I was still troubled about eternity and started drinking and listening to loud music. Maybe I was trying to suppress the voice from inside which gave me questions but no answers. It was in 1966 when, with my friends and relatives, I went on a visit home to Ljevosa. There I met my cousin Simo Ralevic who was a fairly newly converted man. I think he might have been in theological school by then. He was nine years older than me.

We started a Bible study and that was when I first saw a New Testament. For two years I went to the Bible study from time to time, not often. Although I was still not a Christian I would argue against those who opposed Christianity. At one Bible study the subject was time, eternity and the end of time. It was so graphic that it hit my stony heart and mind hard enough for them to open and for me to understand. I saw eternity and Jesus in the centre of that eternity. Then the Holy Spirit brought my conversion which I simply experienced as a moving from above. All that combined to help me to understand about eternity and about Jesus Christ and the reason for his birth, death and resurrection.

After that I could say with inspiration and joy to my friend Cedo, 'From now I am a Christian.' And I remember the words he said. 'You know Dragisa, now the angels in heaven



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are rejoicing.' For me, a nineteen-year-old, there was great joy to know that the angels were rejoicing.

When I told my parents that I had become a Christian my father was just silent. I think he was converted because he was never opposed to it and he read the Bible. My mother in the beginning liked what happened in my life and was not against it. She prepared food when Simo came to celebrate my conversion. Later she opposed my baptism and so on, but she changed somehow after that. Then I could witness to her. Before she died, when she was ninety-three, I often asked her about her faith and, when I explained the way of salvation, she said that she believed.

A difficult time

I started my eighteen months army service the same month I was converted. Illegally I had a small New Testament that I put in my drawer every evening, and every morning I put it in my pocket. After eighteen months it had left a stamp on the lining of my pocket but it was never found. The punishment would have been harsh if it had been. I could, from time to time, not often, read some verses. 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6) was one of my favourite verses at the very beginning because I had found the truth. I remember that very clearly.

As I was a very young believer it was hard to be without church and without Christian fellowship. I shared my faith with my friends in the army when possible. Although I liked to share, it was not easy as I had no older Christians to help



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me grow. In 1970 I left the army and then faced the choice about what to do with my life. One possibility was to go and work in Germany. West Germany was asking for workers and I prepared all the papers to go. But very firm in my mind at the time was the call, because I felt it very strongly, to consecrate myself to something that had value for eternity. That's why I decided to go to mission school, Bible school. There was a Bible school in Novisad.

Future plans

My parents disliked this idea and were very opposed to it. They wanted me to go to Germany where a job was waiting, where there would be money. The struggle inside was very strong. Eventually I tore up my papers for Germany and made the decision to start Bible school. The next years were full of study. After four years in Bible school I decided to study some more because I was single and free. So I went for another four years to the philology faculty of Skopje University. While I was studying there I attended a church about 150 kilometres away every weekend for the whole weekend of meetings. Even when I was studying in Skopje I was always involved in mission work.

I studied language and literature, English and American literature, morphology and many other subjects. All students were obliged to read part of the New Testament because they couldn't study Milton, Shakespeare or Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress without knowledge of the Bible. When I once offered New Testaments as gifts to everybody, thinking they might



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take them to study their university subjects, the professor said they didn't like such propaganda.

After graduating from Skopje in 1978 I went back to Pec. I was not involved in any specific missionary organisation; I just worked and witnessed to spread the gospel. Much of the time that was done by visiting people. If someone called from Croatia or Bosnia or Montenegro, I went there together with some brothers. Brother Simo was often with me. The people we visited contacted us through our literature and knew our church address from that. If they got in touch with us, we were happy to travel long distances to visit them.

The gospel in print

At that time we printed some tracts with a simple gospel message. Simo was busy in Pec printing many different booklets and sending them to people by post. We also went out in the streets and distributed literature, for example, in Montenegro. Montenegro was especially atheistic. We took our rucksacks packed with Christian materials and travelled by bus to different places. When we arrived we stepped out in towns or villages and shared New Testaments and booklets. There were three of us in the team then, Simo, Cedo and me. After two years doing that I moved to Banja.

Banja was a potential new mission field because it was a tourist place and there was no church. I spent 20 per cent of the time there and 80 per cent of the time travelling all around Yugoslavia, not Slovenia. My focus was Montenegro and the Dalmatian coast. Some people joke with me about that



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because Nada, who became my wife, was there. I met Nada on the mission field. She was a Christian from a Catholic background and somehow I came in contact with her. Nada and one brother especially used to come to our Bible studies. We did not work for money. Our support came from many different places: individuals, missions, churches and from different countries too. God took care of all that.

We were heavily involved in the crisis after the war in 1991. I'll never forget preaching the Word and doing humanitarian work in Central and South Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia. Among the places we worked were Vrnjacka Banja, Kraljevo, Trstenik, Krusevac, Krgujevac, Pec, Sarajevo and Sokolac. Millions of pieces of literature were distributed.

In 1999 my mother and other family members had to leave their homes in Ljevosa, three kilometres from Pec. One morning they saw that there was nobody left in the village. They started to go and somehow I knew about the situation. Everybody was leaving at five in the morning and I went into the room about that time and told my wife I was going to Kosovo. Within fifteen minutes I was in the car. I found them in their village. My mother had her belongings in a wheelbarrow. She had refused to leave until then because she had lived there for ninety years. When I found my family beside the road I put them in the car and brought them to my home in Banja.

Ethnic issues

My own family covered both sides of the conflict. I am a Serb from Kosovo and my wife Nada is Croatian. During all



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the troubles we had to act as Christians and not show any bitterness towards people from other ethnic groups. Even today I call all Christian people, whatever their background, to show the unity we all have in Christ. A few months ago I invited Brother Essat, who is from Albania, to come and preach in my church in Albanian.

The town of Pec is on top of a hill. You can see it very clearly. There is a church there. The people there told me, 'You know the church comes to this spot every week and we pray under the statement that "God loves Pec".' So there is a regular church there and the worshippers are Albanian brothers and sister, new believers. God's Word is not preached in vain. For example, I knew Montenegro when it was almost totally atheistic. Now there are believers here and there and people are gathering in groups; churches are being opened. The number of Christians in Croatia and Serbia is growing too.

My heart's desire

Since 1991 we have gone to Serbia, Bosnia and Montenegro to do humanitarian work. For the last seventeen years we've done a great deal there with Blythswood Care. I would like to visit the people more, to be involved in the work of church planting. My heart's desire is to evangelise, to fill many towns with the gospel, to open churches that will bear testimony to people in towns, villages and the countryside.

Sometimes, even when we were doing humanitarian work, life was very dangerous. I will tell you one story of what happened in Bosnia. I was arrested and held for eight hours. For



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the first six hours I thought it was just a routine check. Then they took my personal Bible and looked at it for half an hour, especially at the notes I had written in it in tiny writing. They were looking for a secret code! In their eyes I was an American spy. Then, during the last two hours, I felt something different that I can't explain. I had left my wife and four small children at home and was there on my own. The man who was guarding me told me not to move. Their idea was to kill me. One bullet, finito. The General was informed and he came to see the spy before they killed me.

The General came. Somebody welcomed him and said his name, 'Mr C', and I remembered it was the man I had received many thank-you letters from! I had letters from him in my drawer at home. We had sent humanitarian help for children, for the whole town, including school materials and so on, and I had letters thanking me from this same man! When I heard his name I stood up and said, 'Mr C, I am Mr Dragisa. I have your thank-you letters.' Before I said that he was cursing. After I told him who I was, he stopped. His first question was, 'Can I have a Bible?' I had a package of twenty-four Bibles and I stooped down to get one. Can you imagine? That was the happiest thing, handing him a Bible. It was one of the happiest times of handing over a Bible in my life.

After that I was asked many questions about permissions, about saints, about Christmas, Easter and Ascension holidays. The end of the story is that I persuaded them it was a big rumour that I was a spy, a false rumour just to kill me and be free of me. The General could see that it was not true. Ten

days later they invited me to a big celebration, a banquet with a large number of people at it. After that we continued to go there and do missionary work. Being put in prison didn't stop us. In fact, it helped us to continue to go to Bosnia.

A sound investment

Serbia is a country that needs to hear the gospel. People do not know who Jesus is. I think it's time for Serbia to be evangelised more and more. We have towns and villages without any gospel and they need more investment. Kragujevac is nearby and in need of investment, spiritual investment, prayer investment. Vranje is a place with 70,000 people without God and without the Bible.

I met one family there. After I shared the gospel, I asked them to hear the Bible as I read it to them. Then the lady said, 'Listen to my husband and what he will tell you.' I wondered what he would say. It turned out that his grandfather was Justin Popovic, the famous and reliable theologian. I met him as a young believer and I have all his books. He was localised by the communists and not free to move around. Justin Popovic had to stay in a monastery because they were afraid of his influence. The communists localised many speakers and writers; they tried to hide them, to silence them. The man who was speaking to me was the grandson of the great Justin Popovic, but he didn't have a Bible. I gave one to him.

There is a special tradition in Orthodox churches. People can become 'friends' or 'godfathers' of a church for a year and many believe that, if they do, God will especially bless them.



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People offer bids for the privilege and it goes to the highest bidder. There was a poor woman in Vranje whose child was sick. At the time of bidding she said, 'Please, I have only 400 Euros to give. Please let me be the friend or godfather of this church and God will bless my sick child. Please don't bid against me.' There was a big crowd of people there. One man, who had a special ring, offered 700 Euros. Then someone else offered 1,000 Euros and that person's bid was accepted. He became the friend or godfather of the church. That sad story makes me want to evangelise that poor woman.

This is happening in Serbia today. Today Serbia really, really needs much investment in evangelisation, much investment in prayer. Whenever I get the opportunity I say that to people and I want to say it in this book. Please pray for Serbia.

