

8th EBL NBO Officers' Seminar

2016 – Rome

Bridge - South/Eastern Europe - Jurica Carić

Ladies and Gentlemen,

All Balkan countries, except Greece, are small federations and all of them were under communist rule. It shows the relationship of communism to bridge. In communism playing bridge was considered to be part of capitalist lifestyle and it was not advisable to play. If you played bridge, you couldn't be a good communist, and if you were not a communist, it was hard to make career progress. Once, when working at the Zagreb Paper Mill, I was expected to be appointed a commercial director. The appointment was decided by works council. At one point, the union president stood up and said, "This man is playing bridge, so he can't be appointed as a commercial director." However, I managed to be appointed due to my references, but it was not easy.

Also, playing bridge, one could end up in prison. The Public Disturbance Law prohibited playing cards in public places. It was mainly directed against the matchbox and card sharps and other street confidence men. Because of this Law it was forbidden to play bridge in restaurants, coffee bars, beaches, parks and other places. It was only allowed in private homes, but ignorant policemen were arresting us even in these places. We would spend the night at a police station, in the morning the station head came to work and, after a long debate in which I convinced him that playing in a private home is not an offense, we would be released. In the old times most bridge players were Jewish, and our bridge club was located on the premises of the Jewish community for many years. The location had a status similar to a foreign embassy and the police never went there. A problem was when we wanted to play late into night, after the club was closed. If you then had a little money in your pocket, it would not be taken away. But if you had 300 DM, for instance, the authorities would take it. The request for a refund was complicated, lasted for years and the result was uncertain. Another law was even more dangerous. Article 305 of the Criminal Code stipulated:

1. A person who cheats at cards shall be sentenced to a prison term of up to 5 years.
2. A person who plays cards with someone who can be assumed to play with state money, shall be sentenced to imprisonment of up to 3 years.
3. A person who rents their premises for playing cards shall be sentenced to a prison term of up to 1 year.
4. Any person who plays cards professionally shall be sentenced to a prison term of up to 1 year. It was considered that someone plays cards professionally, if they had shown intent to earn money on cards at least twice. In effect it meant that anybody who played rubber bridge for money twice, could be indicted and sent to prison.

In 1990 communism was brought down. Yugoslavia dissolved into five, and later into seven states, out of which Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia are truly small federations, and in Kosovo there are no bridge players.

Then the war came. A cruel and bloody war between Croats, Serbs and Muslims. It was not possible to travel to Bosnia at all, and to Serbia one could only travel through Hungary. Croatian bridge

players ceased to go to tournaments in Serbia, with just a few players from Serbia coming to the tournament in Pula. Croatian and Serbian open teams played at the European Championships in Montecatini. Relations were cold, but there were no accusations, quarrels or foul language.

Today, there is still hatred, intolerance and retaliation among these nations. However, among bridge players, relations are again friendly and cordial, just like before the war. This shows that the co-existence, tolerance and friendship is possible in this region and bridge players should show that to other citizens.

After the war in Croatia, we started with a stronger promotion of bridge. Today we can say that Croatia is among the European leaders in this segment. From an underestimated game treated as useless card playing, we have achieved that bridge is well respected and equal to all other sports in the eyes of the authorities, the media and other citizens. We have achieved that the Croatian President twice opened bridge events. These were the 2013 Champions League in Opatija and the 2014 European Championships in Opatija. Both times the President travelled from Zagreb to Opatija just for the event. During the Champions League, the then President Ivo Josipovic, Minister of Entrepreneurship Gordan Maras and Prefect of Primorje-Gorski Kotar County Zlatko Komadina watched the vugraph of the entire first match. Here I have several booklets for various bridge events in Croatia, with welcoming speeches written by former Presidents of the Republic of Croatia, Stjepan Mesic and Ivo Josipovic, several ministers as well as the president of the Croatian Olympic Committee, Zlatko Matesa. The national television shows news and interviews from bridge a dozen times a year. The current Minister of Education and Sports is playing bridge, and before becoming the minister, he was the dean of the Faculty of Electronics and Computing in Zagreb, where bridge is taught as an optional subject. President of the Croatian Olympic Committee Zlatko Matesa was elected twice exclusively as a candidate of the bridge federation. In most countries, the Olympic Committee President comes from athletics, football or basketball, and only in Croatia he comes from bridge.

Balkan countries have never been rich, and have been further impoverished during the war and after the separation, so bridge is even more necessary in such areas. If you don't have enough money for a dinner in a restaurant or for theater, alternatively you can sit behind your four walls in front of the TV. You would be more likely to visit your doctor and invent diseases (only if you have a free medical insurance, which is generally the case in Croatia), and be prone to depression. But if you a bridge player, you will go to a bridge club, find twenty acquaintances and friends and have a pleasant evening with them, having perhaps only one coffee, which costs only 60 cents at the bridge club.

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