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# Honorary Degree Convocation Remarks, delivered at the University of Sarajevo on June 9, 1987

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Remarks by President Lubbers

Occasion: Honorary Doctor's Degree

University of Sarajevo

June 9, 1987

Rector Berberovich and distinguished members of the Faculty of the University of Sarajevo. The honor you bestow on me today is in part a public confirmation of a long and deep personal feeling of affection and good will that I hold for you and your country. A feeling that in its practical manifestation has contributed to the exchange between our two institutions and I believe enriched the lives of many. My hope is that it will continue to do so in the future.

I express appreciation to the Faculty of Philosophy for proposing me for this honor, and to the Council of the University for confirming the nomination. I understand that I am the 20th recipient of an honorary doctor's degree conferred by the University. I like the number 20. I hope it is lucky for you and for me.

I particularly appreciate your willingness to schedule this ceremony at a time when students and Professor Herrera from Grand Valley are here at your University. I feel that this degree is a shared honor with my colleagues and students at Grand Valley State College and I am pleased that they are represented by this fine group.

As I walk the streets of Sarajevo and converse with friends and acquaintances I sense the vitality of your city. The magnificent way in which you organized yourselves to be host for the winter olympics four years ago was an outward manifestation of a spirit and pride that is at work bringing to Sarajevo an enhanced position within Yugoslavia and,

I believe, an illustrious era in its long history. We in education understand the importance of a university in the process of progress. You can be proud of your accomplishment in a relatively short time, leading Sarajevo, Bosnia-Hercegovina, and all of Yugoslavia in this post-war period.

As a leader of a relatively new institution also, I take pride in our association as both of us exert a positive influence on our societies that was not available to them only a short time ago. I now want to turn our attention to the beginning of that association for me.

I will never forget the day. The late afternoon sun filtered through the trees, reflecting on the rich green leaves, making them appear to sparkle. The sound of the train wheels on the track competed with the sound of water rushing through the gorge as the train wound its way through the forest near the border between Austria and Yugoslavia. Jesenice was the point of entry. I had looked at that name for weeks on my Yugoslav visa. We never actually saw the town, but the name is fixed in my mind for it is the point of beginning for a great adventure in my life.

The train rolled on to Lublijana where we twelve American students and our leader slept on the floor of a half completed dormitory at the University. Pressing on to Zagreb we arrived at noon, lugged our suitcases through the streets to a place for dining and resting, then at night lugged them back again to the railroad station and embarked for Doboje. That was where we were to contribute to the building of post-war Yugoslavia. The railway line between Doboje and Banja Luka needed a bridge over the River Bosna and for three weeks we Americans, along with students from many countries, built a railroad bed leading to the place where the bridge was to span the river. Two years ago my wife and I, enroute from Belgrade

to Sarajevo, decided to drive through Dobož. I know changes take place, but I was surprised to find a modern, attractive, small city bearing no resemblance to the village with livestock and chickens running through the streets that I had left thirty-four years earlier.

Can you imagine the sense of adventure that possessed a nineteen-year-old American student visiting your country in 1951? It was the day of the Iron Curtain and Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine and the Korean War, and the day of Josip Broz Tito. I wish I had known him. He was no man's puppet. I assume, like all who forge power in a time of war and in the midst of faction and intrigue, he was not hesitant to act energetically in his own self interest to consolidate that power. As he did so his vision for Yugoslavia and his temperament matched what the majority of south Slav people believed in, yearned for, and needed to be citizens of a governable nation. It was this man, a man of historic political proportions, who in 1950 pushed open the door to the west. And in 1951 an American student, excited to penetrate what had until a year before been part of the Iron Curtain, chugged through that door at Jesenice and immediately began a love affair with Yugoslavia that he cannot give up, even 36 years later.

Some adventures evolve into long-lasting commitments with enriching personal and professional experiences. I was not aware in the summer of 1951 when I trudged down the hillside from our student residence to visit the mosque in Sarajevo and stand in the spot where Gavrilo Princip stood that Sarajevo would become for me the place where I would find academic colleagues and good friends, where students from my college would find their first foreign adventures where I found my early adventure, and where my professional colleagues from Grand Valley would come to

enrich their lives amongst the scholars and scientists of a great university. In Sarajevo for thirty-six years I have been building in my heart a second home.

During those years many people and many events came together at the right time so that today a bond has been established between our two institutions; a bond that comes when people gain from one another, when they enjoy one another and become friends.

We have had some good fortune in the process of becoming colleagues and friends. Gerald R. Ford was a congressman from Grand Rapids who became President of the United States and served at a time when Dzemal Bzjedic, a son of Bosnia-Hercegovina, was President of the Executive Council of Yugoslavia. President Bzjedic told me when I met with him in Washington that Jerry Ford had suggested he take good care of the college President from his hometown of Grand Rapids. Later President Bzjedic received me in Belgrade and again encouraged the development of the cooperation between the University of Sarajevo and Grand Valley State College. The blessing of both Presidents is an interesting historical footnote on the origin of our exchange.

In these years of negotiations, people to people contacts, and conviviality, the names of Besarovic, Tanovich, Matic, Humo, Mandic, and now Beberovic fill my mind with thoughts of mutual accomplishment, friendship and good times. We have built together something lasting. We are joined together. Each participant has come away from the experience with new colleagues, with new friends, with new relationships that change life. Our current example is the collaboration of Professors Mandic and Herrera on the publication of a book, both in Serbo-Croatian and English, in the field of comparative education. How many lives, how many projects, how

many new friends have been made in the years since we began? Hundreds! And how did it all begin? I know I would not be a part of it unless your country had opened itself in 1951 when I was ready, as our students here today are ready, to explore beyond our world, to risk, and to enter new relationships.

For me our years together have provided an opportunity as a foreigner to observe your politics, economics, and cultural life. One of the advantages of exchange programs is to be a foreigner. You, I am sure, have the same kind of experience when you visit the United States. The accumulation of my experience among you amounts to something. Whether accurate or not, whether overly simple or superficial, whether interesting to you or not, it does exist.

For thirty-six years I have been impressed by the impact of the Second World War on the national life of Yugoslavia. We Americans lost sons in battle, but we were not a society, like yours, immersed in the daily horrors of bloodshed, betrayal, destruction, dislocation, and starvation. That experience and the Partisan survival and victory appeared to be a glue that bound the various nationalities of South Slavs into the Yugoslav nation after the war. The hero who emerged during the war survived to become the architect of the peace. Man-hero and wartime experience combined are powerful centripetal forces in nation building. But underlying those forces and wisely and widely recognized are centuries of ethnicity with all the feelings, loyalties, and prejudices that provide a centrifugal tug. The generation that is about to inherit places in commerce, government and education have only heard about the war or experienced it as infants. They were formed in a different forge. What is stronger in them, the loyalty to a nation not quite 3/4 of a century

old and recreated in a new image after the war? or to the ancient ties of tribe and family and religious tradition? To have both, to celebrate the nation of the South Slavs and to take strength and pride in those ties that link a person to the deep past has been the genius of your post war nation. Now the time is coming when those who came together in the fire will be gone. The hero has already departed. Two props for the Yugoslav nation are no longer available. What takes their place?

The experience of your nation has a parallel in our national experience. To the United States it happened in the mid 19th century. The fighters in our revolution were gone. No one on the scene knew George Washington except in books. Ethnic and religious loyalties were strong and divisive. As a nation we had to recommit ourselves to principles established at the origin of our nation, those principles that were human and political; not economic. A new generation had to define America for itself. It took civil war to settle some of the major issues, but the nation stood. It survived the crisis that comes when the founders are gone.

In the introduction to the University of Chicago publication of Ivo Andric's The Bridge on the Drina, Professor William H. MacNiel states: "Anyone reading The Bridge on the Drina will find it hard to believe that its author through Marxism or any other new faith could be expected to resolve long-standing national and religious conflicts." There is no doubt that Ivo Andric wanted those conflicts resolved, but he knew the depth of past attachments and the convolutions that take place as people move through time toward different and often contradictory objectives.

From one foreigner's view, Yugoslavia has reached or is approaching a time of national definition, not necessarily because of economic or political crisis, but because "time like an ever rolling stream bears all

its sons away." The guard is always being changed to some extent. But in national life when the founders are no longer manning the bastions of power, the nation must make some important decisions. It is like a relay race when the baton is being passed for the first time. The skill with which it is passed may determine the outcome of the race.

I am not well versed in the daily politics and economics of your nation. I am inclined to believe that there may be several kinds of systems that can work in the world. Whatever the system, there are, I believe, values that must prevail in order for a system to work, and these values are essential to any successful national life. There is no substitute for commitment to work and through work to produce a good product or useful service. There is no way to encourage good work if the worker is not encouraged to perform well by good compensation and enlightened management. There is no substitute for a legal system that people believe gives justice to the society in which they live their personal, professional, and political lives. There must be some common ideals shared by people that engenders loyalty of individuals and groups to the whole, and finally the political system must provide an environment in which a large majority of people are free to make choices about what they do and who they see within the law.

If these values and conditions exist in a society, the society is likely to continue as an entity no matter what the turmoil, the history, or the current crisis. Only outside military power could destroy it. I cherish these conditions for Yugoslavia and for the United States. Utopia is not for this world, but striving and right thinking can tip the balance toward healthy national life.

For some time now, in central Bosnia and western Michigan, we



have been contacting one another in the hope that our professional lives will be better and that as a result our institutions will be better. Perhaps if our institutions are better we can contribute each in our way to the improvement of the societies we serve. If those societies have confidence in themselves because they are well served, perhaps there is a better chance for those values to prevail that will make for healthy national life and therefore improved international life.

I doubt if our mutual program of exchange that you recognize today by honoring me will be considered a major element in the lives of our nations, but it is our element, our contribution. It is doing what we can to reaffirm our faith in people, in academic pursuit, in our desire for our two nations to have integrity, and to promote peace so that we can pursue the good life without fear and with the hope that somehow we can achieve it.