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An American in Zagreb: Todd Becker, an experienced American diplomat, Acting Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia

Medvednica Reminds Me of Breugel's Paintings

A Zagreb carpenter repaired our old and valuable wardrobe with a real master's affection. When you meet such people, you realise that you can love their country, says Todd Becker, an American diplomat in Zagreb.

By Boris PAVELIC

“Do you remember Breugel's paintings? Hunters in a winter twilight, returning to their houses through the snow, after a good hunt, and black silhouettes of birds outlined on the grey background of the sky? The scenery under Medvednica reminds me of those famous paintings. It is a very similar landscape, with almost identical colours. It is a genuine pleasure to watch this serene landscape,” Todd Becker contemplates about the slopes of Zagrebacka gora, while watching them through big glass walls of his comfortably warm living room in Gornja Dubrava, where he has lived with his wife for more than a year.

This American diplomat with 35 years of service took over the position of Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia last September. On the day of our visit to the Becker family in their home on the slopes the Medvednica mountain, Mr. Becker was resting from a hard working week, after he temporarily took over the duty of Head of Mission, and after he saw off Bernard Poncet, his former superior, who went home after the end of his diplomatic mandate.

There is no lack of joie de vivre at the Beckers' home. Although the children are far away – they chose their own careers long ago – Todd and his wife, Christa, a German lady from Leipzig, are never alone. A friend's son, Jonathan Eischen, is with them, a young student who is interested in the non-governmental sector in the Balkans, especially in BiH. When he returns to his studies in Vienna in a short time, Todd and Christa will entirely devote themselves to their benevolent preoccupation of love of dogs: in their home, you will be greeted by the merry barking of Felix, Jerry, Tina, Max and Lora. They are well-looked-after animals, but their owners are not slaves to the imperative of pedigree. On the contrary: “Those are pets from Greek and Croatian streets,” Todd states proudly. They saved the Greek, German and Scottish shepherds Felix, Jerry and Tina and the small curly Max from wandering in Greece, where Todd worked for a long time. Lora, on the other hand, was wandering through Croatian suburbs. “She rewarded us with eight puppies, and we were able to find a home for all of them: they are scattered from Germany to Zagreb's Dubrava.”

From Germany to Fiji

Todd Becker has been a diplomat since 1966. “I planned to be a teacher, but I successfully passed all examinations necessary for diplomatic service, so I remained in

that line of work.” He worked longest in Germany, where he lived to see the fall of the Wall. Immediately after, in the second half of 1990, he was transferred to Leipzig, the town of Johann Sebastian Bach, in the eastern part of the country, where he met Christa, the tourist manager. Christa knows what life is like under communism, and she successfully compares the transitional experiences of Croatia and East Germany. As a young girl, she sang in a choir of the Bach’s church. “We sang, naturally, sacral and spiritual pieces. This especially bothered the communists.”

After Germany, Becker worked in Greece, and then at the American Mission to the EU in Brussels. In the meantime, he spent a short time on the Fiji and Tahiti isles, in the South Pacific. In the late summer of 1998, he organised the UN Monitoring Mission in Kosovo, lead by William Walker, known to the Croatian public as the man who successfully completed the UNTAES Mission in the Danube Region. “In Kosovo, I handed over the ID card, a telephone and a car personally to Walker.” Half a year after that, Milosevic started a war in the region, which caused the military intervention in Yugoslavia. Becker arrived in the OSCE Mission to Croatia in September.

The home of his family in Zagreb reveals aesthetic inclinations: it could hardly be concluded from that smartly and humanely arranged space, that a politician with experience in the cruelties of the transitional East Germany and the Balkans in war lives there. A spacious living room, lit by daylight, is filled with 150 years old wooden furniture, numerous paintings, shelves with books, carpets and works of art; all this is complemented by Christmas decorations.

The beauties of life in Zagreb

Todd remembers the recent happening that, he says, taught him a lot about Croats: the structure of a valuable, massive wooden 19th century wardrobe, bought by Christa in Germany, came loose during its transfer to Croatia. The family found a carpenter in Zagreb, who repaired it excellently, and after that, he came to check if the wardrobe was fine several times. “He did it with the affection and craftsmanship that has disappeared in the West, and which is now beginning to have a come-back in America, because people are rediscovering the values of old crafts. It is the skill of real masters. When you meet such people, you realise that you can love their country,” says Todd. The area in which they live, the northern part of Zagreb, is nice to live in, serene, relaxing and friendly, says Todd.

“We met our neighbours as we practically live outside, in the street and in front of the house. We communicate in different ways: some speak English, some German, and we are struggling with the Croatian language a bit. Christa gathers children from the neighbourhood in our home and assists them with computers, and for the Halloween, on 31 October, she made them happy by carving faces into pumpkins. Next week she will bake a Christmas cake for them. The neighbours are very polite and friendly, but the children – they are always the greatest friends. They like the dogs and they take them for walks, and we teach them how to treat them with attention and real care,” says Todd.

In about fifteen months he learnt basic Croatian phrases and otherwise, apart from English, he also speaks German and Greek. "I am sorry that my Croatian is not better, but I simply did not have a chance to learn since we speak English at work. However, I did learn basic idioms, so I would be able to communicate in everyday situations."

Unknown and known Croatia

Although they have been in Croatia for something more than a year, the Beckers got familiar with a major part of the country.

"We visited all the places which are not visited by tourists," jokes Todd, referring to his diplomatic commitments which were the reason he got familiar with the names of all villages that we had been mentioning in reference to the misfortune of war: Beli Manastir, Hrvatska Kostajnica, Glina, Benkovac, Donji Lapac, Knin, Srb, Islam Latinski and Grcki...

But the Beckers also visited the 'known' Croatia: Dubrovnik, Pula, Split, Cres, Susak, Krk... "There are only Hvar, Korcula and Rijeka left to be visited," they say. And, of course, they noticed the difference between the western and the eastern part of the country: the settlements along the border with Slovenia, they say, almost do not differ at all from the western neighbours. Further, towards the east, one can see difficulties. "It will be easier when one will be able to come faster to Gracac or Split or Karlovac," thinks Becker, like a native Croat.

They spotted, of course, the monuments, especially the architecture, which is Todd's private interest:

"We were fascinated by the Veliki Tabor castle, Diocletian's Palace, Art Nouveau architecture in Zagreb, but also by village houses in Kumrovec and the wooden cottages (*korablje*) in the area of the Kupa River. Christa adds how she also admires the Stone Gates (*Kamenita vrata*) in Zagreb: "It is evident how people try to take care of the monuments, although that is extremely expensive. The situation reminds us of Leipzig in 1990. That year was the year of the fall of Communism and the facades were all grey. But, as the years were passing by, bit by bit, things started to look brighter: the façades are getting a new look".

Of course, they could not resist the beauty of the Adriatic, although Todd got to know Greece quite well. "We bathed in Lopud. It was a wonderful experience. The Adriatic is a clean and beautiful sea, a treasure that needs to be cherished with special attention," he claims.

They did not neglect the Croatian art either, and obviously its best part: "We really had fun watching "Stilske vjezbe" with Pero Kvirgic, although we did not understand the language. We could do that because the acting was so picturesque and convincing that we truly enjoyed ourselves together with the domestic audience." They also visited the opera and ballet in Zagreb, the concert hall Lisinski, the folk-dances festivals of ethnic minorities, the Croatian National Theatre in Osijek: "I am impressed by that small pearl

which was devastated during the war in 1991.” Christa does not even shy away from a paradox: “The cultural life in Zagreb is almost richer than the one in Brussels. There they tell you: if you wish to enjoy cultural events, we recommend you to go to Paris.”

The success of Croatia is also the success of the OSCE

“When I arrived in Croatia last year for the first time, I felt as though I arrived home, in Leipzig, which I left in 1994. Arrival in Croatia reminded me of the experience from the East Germany: how people from the West used to teach us how we should behave, what to do, what to change – and in most of the cases it would turn out that we had to change everything – and what was good for us. It was a stressful experience. I consider such an approach wrong. Instead of imposing the solutions, co-operation is needed. There is a question that can always be addresses to such advisers: “How can you know what is good for my country?” This is the manner in which Christa compares Croatia with her homeland, Germany, adding that one should keep in mind that Germany has an advantage of having much greater financial strength.

“We need to learn from each other,“ her husband adds. “We, the international community, participate in the process of making clear what Croatia needs to do to accomplish its goals. But that cannot be done by disregarding the historical and specific context of this country. That is extremely important: to take into account the specific heritage and characteristics of Croatia. Therefore, I try to understand the environment and the problems, and that can be best achieved through direct acquaintance with people”.

When the Beckers get together with friends in their home for Christmas, that will be a short break from diplomatic affairs. When the holidays are over, Todd Becker and his wife Christa, who assists young people and is involved in de-mining, will become dedicated to their work again. And Todd describes it like this: “The success of Croatia is also the success of the OSCE. Croatia should look into the future. It is not easy, but leaning back on the past makes the future impossible. There is a time when one has to say: ‘OK! That was it. Let us see how we can build the future together!’ And for that you have a good example from the history of my country: Call to mind what countries are currently among the biggest friends of America: Germany and Japan.”