

Djuro K.

"It was the fault of the politicians, not of the ordinary people."



Djuro K., m., born in 1936, a Bosnian Serb from a village near the Kozara Mountains, in Switzerland since 1966

Where do you come from?

From Bosanska Gradiska. That's in the north of Bosnia, on the border with Croatia. I was born there in 1936. We were a big family with eight children. I had four sisters and three brothers. My parents had a farm. We children helped out from the age of seven. We watched the cows, looked after the younger brothers and sisters, or did light work. We lived happily until 1942, when the Second World War reached us. Then my whole family was deported to the Jasenovac concentration camp. It was run by Croats with the help of Moslems. We lived on what was then Croatian land. That means that the contemporary Croatia, the contemporary Bosnia, part of Serbia and Montenegro were all at that time in Croatia. This was brought about through Hitler's help. The Croats wanted to exterminate all the Serbs in the country.

In Jasenovac they separated the men from the families and sent them to forced labour in Germany, among them my father and my brother, who was eighteen years old. They had to work hard there for four years, but they survived the war. They sent me, a sister and a brother on from Jasenovac to a children's camp. As sister, a brother and my mother stayed in Jasenovac and were killed there. We don't know how they died.

How did you learn of this?

I came back to my birthplace from the camp later. There wasn't any of my large family there any more. I lived with an aunt for the rest of the war. When the war came to an end, my mother, brother and sister just didn't come back. That was how we knew that they had been killed there.

Can you still recall the day on which you realised that your mother wasn't going to come back?

The other women and the old men gradually came back home. I expected every day that my mother would also come, but she didn't. I still grieve for her today, and I don't let my thoughts run over this time any more.

Nevertheless, I have never hated a Croat. It was the fault of the politicians, not of the ordinary people.

Who was with you then?

My father, who had come back from the war. We lived together for a couple of months. Then I was taken into a boarding school and lived there. All the children who had lost one or both parents were looked after by the state after the war, no matter whether they were Serbs, Croats or Moslems. I feel that was a good thing. We could go to school. It was wonderful. Of course there were problems at the beginning: we didn't have much to eat, and hardly any clothes. But things got better year by year.

I was a very good pupil, but very unsettled. The teachers always had problems with me. But I wanted to learn something, so that I could achieve something in life. Yugoslavia lost nearly two million people in the war. There were very few people who could read and write.

The teachers looked after us well, taught us to behave well, looked that we learned and that we were properly dressed. Many people say that Communism is a bad thing. But it's not all bad. In this school, for instance, we were all equal, and justice prevailed. We had playing fields, and we could play football in our spare time. We forgot that we had no parents. We were like a big family.

Did the teachers at the boarding school speak to you about the war?

No, that was taboo. People just wanted to forget it. In the nineties we saw the sequel to the Second World War.

How often did you see your father while you were in the boarding school?

Pretty often. I often visited him in the village. He lived there with my two sisters and a brother. We were happy when we saw each other.

Were you ever homesick?

At the beginning, but then less and less, because I noticed that we had a rather better life than the people in the village, where you had to work hard. I didn't like village life. I had a more privileged life than the village population.

How did your father live without your mother?

He had a difficult life. A couple of times he would have married, but he always said: "I'll never find such a good wife as my first." He didn't marry again. His daughter and his son married later on. My father lived with his son and daughter-in-law until he died. The son and daughter-in-law still live in the same house.

What values did he pass on to you?

He always told me I should finish school and learn a trade. I should live and let live. He said: "Everyone who's born on this earth has a right to live."

Was your father a religious person?

My parents were very religious. Both father and mother always went to church. But I wasn't raised in any faith at the boarding school. That is an aspect of upbringing that I missed.

What happened after your schooldays?

I did four years of primary school and then three years of grammar school. As a youth I had two wishes: to learn a trade and to play football. I did an apprenticeship as a turner in Vukovar and played football at the same time. I wanted to become a professional footballer at one stage. I managed to become reasonably good at football, but instead I became a good professional turner. Once I had finished my apprenticeship and started work I lived well. I earned good money and I was happy.

How did you get to know your wife?

When I was still an apprentice. Later, in 1962, after my military service, we married. In 1965 we had a son. In 1966 I left Yugoslavia and went to Germany to work there. For a short while, as I thought at the time. I didn't go for economic reasons, but because I was young and curious. I wanted to experience something new, to get to know other people and other countries. I had a job in Karlsruhe with Siemens. The firm treated me very correctly, and I was very happy.

But I soon decided that I didn't want to spend longer in Germany. I only worked there for three months. During this time I sorted out a work visa for Switzerland. In Germany I had met

plenty of acquaintances from Vukovar who were happy that I was there and helped me. I didn't want to disappoint these people. So I didn't tell anyone that I was going to Switzerland. I just disappeared one day. I came to Baden to the Brown Boveri firm and already had a work visa and a residence permit. I went to work straight away. I really liked Switzerland.

What were your first impressions of Switzerland?

I really liked the countryside. I liked the people too. But it seemed to me that the people were very thrifty, very quiet, a little insecure. I had the impression that they were a bit frightened of the future, and that was why they were so thrifty.

I began work in December. It was still dark in the factory, so the lights were on. Around ten o'clock it was light, and an old Swiss labourer would switch off the lights. I liked that, and I still value it. In Yugoslavia that wouldn't have happened, because the electricity was paid for by the state. It was the wrong attitude, of course, not to switch it off because of that.

There weren't any problems at work, and the wages were good.

Were there other Yugoslavs in the company?

Yes. It was the time in which lots of Yugoslavs came to Switzerland: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians . . . but at that time we were all compatriots. We didn't differentiate. I got to know a lot of other Yugoslavs and I enjoyed spending time with them and discussing whatever was new at home.

I concentrated on my work in the first years and soon noticed that of course I had to learn the language. At that time there were lots of evening courses and I did mine with my wife. I learned for years and always had trouble with the language. I don't have any talent for learning languages. I worked very hard at it, but I'm still not content and I'm still learning.

When did you bring your wife and your son to Switzerland?

I came here in 1966, my wife a year later. At that time it wasn't any problem, because there were lots of jobs vacant in every sector of industry. My wife also found work. However, because of the law we could only bring my son here three years later. He was six years old when he came. After half a year he was able to start school. At first he had some difficulties with the language, but then it went well. My wife also settled in well.

Only the working hours caused me a bit of bother. In Yugoslavia we had started work at six in the morning and stopped at two. Then we had had the whole afternoon free, for rest and recreation, for sport, for our private lives. Here we started at seven, worked until half past eleven, took an hour for lunch and then worked again until half past five. There wasn't much

time left over for one's private life. I grasped very quickly that here one lives during the week just to work.

Did you want to stay here for a long time?

We got on in our careers and earned more and more. We always thought that we would only stay here temporarily. So we set ourselves the goal of earning and saving something here. We worked quite a lot and did overtime. We wanted to go home in two or three years with something in our pockets. But the years passed by and we slowly accepted the life here and settled in. And we slowly became foreign at home. Then things got worse and worse in Yugoslavia, and so we're still here.

Which nation do your friends in Switzerland belong to?

In the beginning we had most contact with our compatriots, and less with Swiss people or other foreigners. The main barrier was the language, and also the traditions. I had most of my contact with Swiss people at work or in the neighbourhood. In the six-family apartment block where I first lived, everybody except us was Swiss. We gradually developed contact with these families. These people accepted us and helped us with the language. Things went better and better. We still visit these families today.

How long did you work in Baden?

Two years. Then I got a job in Zurich with the Escherwies company. I stayed there for thirty years. That was a long time, but it's also good. You know a lot of people, you value a lot of people, and you're valued by a lot of people.

At first I always thought that Swiss workmates earned more than we foreigners. But that wasn't true. The wages were set in proportion to effort.

Were you organised in a trade union?

Not here, no, because my experience was that trade unions don't do what they're supposed to. I had always been in various organisations in Yugoslavia, and that didn't do us much good either. Due to these poor experiences I had no interest in trade unions. I found that, as long as there was work, there weren't any problems. If the work isn't there or we're not able to work, then no-one can help us.

What work did your wife do?

In Switzerland she was a nurse for the Swiss institute for epilepsy for ten years. She worked 60 percent and did the housekeeping besides. Then I found a half-day job for her in the office at my company, Escherwies. She's still working there.

How did she settle in here?

There were always problems, mostly because of the language. We were aware that that was normal, and that we had to tackle these problems. We didn't expect that this would be the land of milk and honey. We knew that we worked here and had to deal with various problems.

How often did you have contact with your relatives in Yugoslavia?

We always kept up contact, with letters and by phone, and we sometimes visited our relatives in Yugoslavia and gave them material support. I helped my sister and my brother financially. But I sent my father pocket money every month. He often took it into the town nearby, met old friends, drank beer, talked and bought cigarettes.

At what point of time was it clear to you that you would stay in Switzerland and not return to Yugoslavia?

When our son had finished primary school and attended secondary school for three years and then started an apprenticeship. Then I knew that I had to stay in Switzerland for Boris's schooling for at least another four years. When after four years he had finished his apprenticeship as an electronics technician, we had reached a crossroads: we reflected seriously whether we should go back.

The three of us discussed it. And I saw then that, if we went home, we would be sure to want to return to Switzerland one day. But that wouldn't be possible any more, because we wouldn't have the necessary papers. Therefore I suggested that we should first get Swiss citizenship. My wife and my son agreed. The very next day we got the necessary forms, filled them out and submitted them. Then we waited three years, until our citizenship came through. In the meantime, a great deal had changed in Yugoslavia, and we stayed, thinking: "We can go back at any time, if we want to." But we've stayed here until today, and I feel at home here. I don't think about going back any more.

Has your relationship to Switzerland been changed by the passport?

Not at all. I know that I have all the rights and duties of other Swiss, but that I'm only a Swiss citizen on paper. Only the second generation, my son, will really be Swiss. We're half and half. I can't forget my old homeland. My roots are there. And that is something one has to accept.

Do you take an interest in Swiss politics?

Yes, but only in a limited way, because it takes a lot of time and you have to be interested in politics. But I vote regularly. That's my duty, and as a good Swiss I do my duty.

How do you see Swiss and foreigners living together here in the future?

The various language and culture groups in Switzerland seem to live together well. But I believe this appearance is deceptive. The ethnic groups feel like visitors here, that they're only here temporarily. They don't have anything solid to stand on here and so they feel insecure. So they have don't have the courage to show their true face, their aggression, for instance. If the day comes that they feel as safe and permanent here as the Swiss, there could be problems.

We saw in ex-Yugoslavia what it means for several ethnic groups to live together. But it was only accomplished by force, and so was fragile. Anything that is accomplished by force does not last long.

What could we do here in Switzerland so that these groups can live together better?

We could try to lessen the difference through more contact, so that we accept the others more and can say that the earth is for everyone.

You've been in Switzerland for 33 years. Have you experienced hostility as a foreigner?

No, I've never had any bad experiences living together with the Swiss and with other ethnic groups. I've always been accepted as a person, as a craftsman at work and as a person privately. When something bad happens to us foreigners we often believe that it's because we're foreigners. But that's not true. Bad things also happen to lots of Swiss people, and we've also had bad experiences in our homeland.

How has your image of Yugoslavia changed since the nineties and since the war?

That's a topic I'd prefer not to talk about. It's a great shame that it came to a war in ex-Yugoslavia. The politicians are guilty for causing the war, not the ordinary people. My picture of Yugoslavia is completely different from that of ex-Yugoslavia. They're two different worlds. Yugoslavia was my homeland in the old days, and I liked it. This thing we call ex-Yugoslavia, I mean Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia, I don't like. I'd like to forget all about it as soon as possible. And, the things that are reported in the media about this conflict don't tally with reality.

