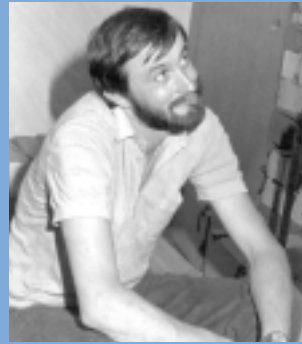


Introducing SVEMIR POPOVIC

ARCHIVIST

CROATIA, SERBIA & AUSTRALIA



Tell us about the land where you were born?

I was born in 1961 in Dalmatia on the Adriatic coast of Croatia, when it was part of the former Yugoslavia. My childhood was a really nice period of my life, without any trouble and full of fun. I lived with my parents, grandparents and brother and went to school with family and friends.

When I finished high school in 1980 I took part in military service for a year, which was compulsory for the male population between 19 and 27 years of age. People usually look back on their military service as lost time; I also think about it in this way. Still, life was nice and quiet until 1991, when the civil war began in my country and spoiled our future.

What led you to become an archivist?

When I completed my university history course in Sarajevo, in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, I came to the conclusion that I was far too young to be a high school teacher and so decided to try a career in another historical field. I knew something of archives practice through an introductory subject I had taken during my studies and from archival research for seminars and exams. I felt that a job in an historical milieu with the interesting challenges of research work would be perfect for me.

My archival career started in March 1986, when I was accepted as an archivist candidate in a regional archival authority in Karlovac, Croatia. It was my first job after I finished university and it determined my future career completely. I learned the mysteries of this profession, discovering the real meaning of words like document, file, records, collection, holding and repository. At the same time I prepared myself for a special vocational examination in Zagreb, which I passed during my second working year in the archives. Everything I learned in that early period helped me later when the civil war started and I had to leave Karlovac and return to Dalmatia to live with my parents.

Describe your life and work during the war?

There was a break in my archival career during the war when I taught history for a year at the same high school where I had studied when I was a teenager. Part of my role involved maintaining students' files and managing the school's archival operations. Then in September 1992 I was offered a position in the provincial archives in Knin. Although I was returning to my former career, it was in totally new and unknown conditions.

It was war time and many cultural monuments needed protection. As a member of the Committee for Cultural Monuments Protection I was responsible for protecting archival materials. I used to visit councils and discuss ways of protecting all cultural monuments – especially archival records, because of the nature of information they contained. Trying to collect records and keep them from being lost forever, my colleagues and I occasionally had to remove them to safe repositories by ourselves, without any support from local authorities.

Surrounded by the national and religious conflicts of the civil war and by people unable to focus on anything but their basic needs, our efforts seemed like dangerous adventures. Unfortunately I have since heard from people back home that a lot of the records and precious historical monuments that we saved were later destroyed.

What path did your life take after the war?

After the war ended in 1995, I had to leave my home like 300 000 other Serbs from Croatia, and settle down as a refugee in Valjevo, a city in north-west Serbia. I consider myself one of the lucky ones, because I had a chance to continue my work soon after I arrived. I got a job in a regional archives authority, which made my refugee life seem much easier than that of many others. I lived and worked for five years in Valjevo, dealing with the local customs and history. It was my last job before I emigrated to Australia.

Why did you decide to come to Australia?

My new colleagues as well as other residents of Valjevo were nice, helpful and full of understanding, although the country was in deep economic and political crisis. Another war, which I didn't want to take part in, was appearing on the horizon. I strongly opposed the ruling party policy at the time, so there was only one solution – to find a new country and a better life far away from any war.

Australia was a logical choice for me. Actually, I had been listening to stories about Australia since my early childhood, because all my father's siblings and close relatives came to Australia, beginning in 1949. My memories of unusual presents from the far land on the other side of the planet helped me to decide. I believed I could not be a complete stranger in a country with what I believe is the best migration policy on earth, in a country with so many relatives of mine, in the world's last oasis. There was of course the obstacle of language, but I found it a piece of cake compared with the problems I had to leave behind.

Tell us about your life since you arrived in Australia?

Not long after I arrived in 2000 I felt at home. During the first year I completed a few English courses and discovered a lot about the language and local expressions. Whilst helping the older people of my community, I had dealings with authorities such as Centrelink and the Housing Commission, which helped develop my English speaking skills and my self confidence. In January this year I began a Skillmax course, which prepared me for entry into an Australian working environment. It also helped place me in a work experience position at the Western Sydney Record Centre, which then led to my current job at the archives.

Thanks to the friendly environment and pleasant staff of State Records I have already had the opportunity to use my skills in various fields of the archival profession. It is exciting to do historical research and find the desired information. That is why I like my job. That is the reason I wish to work as an archivist forever. All I have changed are my country and language.

What have you learnt about Australia since you have been here?

In two years I have discovered some of those little secrets about Australia one can see and feel only living and dealing with Australian people on a day-to-day basis. My general knowledge about Australia was created long before any idea of migration emerged. Firstly, at home, then at school, I was told many interesting geographical,

botanical and zoological details about Australia. As an historian I was also interested in the specifics of Australian settlement in the past, as well as in migration after World War II. Since arriving I have found out more about the social and political systems of Australia, and about friendly, open-minded Australians proud of the cultural and historical heritage which led to the development of this multicultural society.

What are your hopes and plans for the future?

Considering the fact that I arrived in Australia as a middle-aged person, my wishes and expectations are far from dreams. First of all I have to become confident in English. It will help me to become a good citizen of Australia and, for sure, a good professional.

← Svemir Popovic, *Historical Archives in Karlovac, Croatia, 1987*
↓ *Western Sydney Records Centre, 2002*

