

EXCLUSIVE

By Mohammad Memarian*

"I am a doctor by profession, a poet by temperament, and a diplomat only by circumstance." That's how Drago Štambuk, current Croatian envoy to Tehran, introduced himself almost 20 years ago in a lecture delivered to Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at the Harvard University, where he was a visiting professor. Štambuk was launched into a career in diplomacy when Croatia declared its independence in 1991. Over the years, that took him as ambassador to the UK, India, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, and finally Iran. Quite a stretch for a circumstantial career.

The now 71-year-old Croat, however, was not born a diplomat. Trained in internal medicine, he worked and lived in London since 1983, where he was among the first who researched AIDS. And by all accounts, he had discovered his knack for poetry much earlier.

Knowing him for quite some time, I recalled a local author in a Night of Poetry session in my hometown of Isfahan as saying, "Once a poet, always a poet," even if one happens to practice medicine, or diplomacy for that matter. And Štambuk surely has his way with words, which certainly comes handy in diplomacy. But for him, words well-spoken seem to be too sacred to

be merely a means to an end.

Having his roots in mind, I couldn't help but aim for higher levels of Maslow's pyramid, if you will, when I reached out to Štambuk for a short exchange on diplomacy. I wanted to see the world of international relations from the vantage point of an accomplished poet, who, among other things, received the 'Order of the Rising Sun' from the Japanese emperor. After all, he had written fine haikus.

Reading through his answers to my questions, I could as easily call the bulk of them a very short treatise on the poetics of diplomacy. And it kept me daydreaming about a world in which poets run the countries.

In such a phantasmagorical world, disputes would arise, of course, since we are all humans. Much would be lost in translation. Traditional authors would form conservative parties to challenge modernists who they deem to be "too liberal with the form." "Gross Verse Production" would be a source of national pride, and "other countries don't rhyme well enough" would be a leitmotif of trash talks by demagogue poet-leaders. An International Court of Plagiarism would be established to investigate the gravest of crimes.

But for all that, it would be a much better world in every single respect that matters

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It is indeed exhilarating, if not rare, to find a man of letters serving as a diplomat. I wonder, however, that the realm of politics, especially at an international level, might be too rough for the fine sensibilities of an accomplished author and poet. With all due respect, how do you survive in that realm? And what can literature contribute to international politics?

We are all made of various layers. All of us are complex human beings even when we are unaware of our layers and origins, and these are spread thinly or densely through our vertical and horizontal being. Man is a mystery; crucified between sky and earth with the potential to reach higher spheres of thoughts and also with the capacity to debase himself in the muddy ground.

Humanity without divinity is bestiality and if we are just a tiny bit aware of this statement, our primary duty in this life should become the effort to excel in our divine humanity, not in our beastly condition.

The fine line between good and evil runs inside each person's heart, not between nations. This line changes its course and direction but our desired and higher human destiny is founded on augmentation and prevalence of good over evil. Subtlety is always stronger than coarseness. The storm will break the tree but not the grass.

"He is a poet" might sound sometimes derogatory, though having a poetic mind and sensibility is privilege because it qualifies one to understand better our humanity, our motivations and ways, brings along – at least in my case – a lot of empathy and tolerance, which I regard as an asset in international arena.

Arrogance is never welcomed and a haughty attitude doesn't pass well in human relations. Today and ever, the dictum "might is right" prevails but to myself and to my country of Croatia's understanding, the reverse is the preferred choice, i.e. "right is might."

When I ask my fellow ambassadors what the proportion of principle versus interest is in their countries' policies, they are always surprised. If ten percent of policies are based on principle, the world would be very well off. The ethics in international relations is, unfortunately, not high on agenda; it is a little more present domestically, though not inevitably.

Literature reveals our human nature and self-understanding – therefore, it contributes to a deeper, more profound and subtle ways of seeing, of revelations.

Who nowadays dares to speak about victories? Sheer survival is the watch-word. To endure and to preserve our lives is the utmost we can do at the moment, the utmost we can aspire for. Literature and art are the treasure troves of these sustaining values and, therefore, can certainly contribute to desired peace and harmony in our damaged world and its international politics.

Croatian Ambassador to Iran Dr. Drago Štambuk: Shared emotional, historical background can bring two nations closer together

If I'm not mistaken, you once wrote: "Here I am, constructing ruins / not even the strongest wind / shall harm them." It sounds dystopian to me. And, as it happens, many people across the world have been feeling dystopian vibes for quite some time, given the wars, precarious economic situations, global warming, and most recently the pandemic. How do you think we can promote hope in our gloomy times?

I don't think this quotation of mine is dystopian; at least that isn't all about it. Ruins paradoxically nurture hope and history is peppered with them – by the acts of creation of beauty and destruction of it, which results often in haunting remains.

tempts to compensate. I would call this the state of our world.

We should work as a mankind on changing consciousness and educating younger generations to be more noble. But without good examples and worthy predecessors, it's going to be problematic or challenging – how we like to name problems today while avoiding the exact naming. My personal dictum is to be creative and to do good – as much as it is possible and as much as I can. One candle can ignite thousand other candles – so let's try and excel in changing ourselves while setting better example for our offspring.

I am an idealist and I believe that without ideal-

and later, by invitation of Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, came to the south, next to Adriatic Sea, to fend off Avar invasion and there afterwards they settled and founded Red Croatia.

Only the Persians name the sides of the world by colors (white for west, red for south, black for north, blue for east). We are also inheritors of many Persian decorative patterns and the most important piece of our coat of arms – chequers (red and white) originates from this part of the world.

In November last year I was invited to Hamedan (Ekbatan) by the Chamber of Commerce and after interacting with the business, medical and cultural communities, I visited the cliff at Bagastan and looked with great awe and excitement at Darius deep reliefs and inscription in three old languages describing his reign, in which Harvatia/Croatia is referred to. I was deeply impressed by the historical city of Hamedan, its treasures and history.

As medical doctor I was moved by the mausoleum of Ibn Sina (Avicenna). The governor invited me to Avicenna's Day celebration on August 23 and then, personally aware of great polymath's importance, I suggested and proposed him that this day be celebrated worldwide through putting it on UNESCO list.



My native place, Selca, on the island of Brač, off the Adriatic coast, was burned down to the ground by the Italian occupying forces during the Second World War and my dear father, who was the mayor, with great efforts saved the people but could not, alas, save this beautiful stony village full of palaces and the finest stonemasonry. Therefore, I can say that I was born among the ruins, in an accidentally preserved wing of the family palace.

Being born among ruins has marked me. While growing up I missed cellars and attics – imaginative spaces which sensitive children usually crave for. I had to compensate in another way – by words and poetry expanding into spiritual spaces which have become my priority, without for all that abandoning the real world. I hope my activities in life balance the two. We live indeed in a dangerous and threatening times. Ruins are also a symbol of survival and endurance, in spite of everything.

In this shrinking world, if we do not expand our hearts, if we do not give love and receive love, we as a mankind and earth-civilization will not survive.

Turning towards many centuries of time-honored values that are in Rumi's, Saadi's, Hafez's and Attar's poetry, Iranians as the real lovers of poetry with an old and exquisite heritage do understand instinctively where universal values abide, what are the sources of comfort from which to drink, educating new generations and strengthening their inner spiritual selves. Greed with profitocratic tendencies will break us in the end if we don't retreat from their overwhelming and impulsive force. Hope is an inalienable part of the world of values; so in promoting universal values we cling to the hope that world might not fall entirely apart. Humans' love affair with a real, not fake, God and genuine solidarity are more important than any ideology.

As a physician, you belong to a pioneer generation of researchers who investigated AIDS. That, for me, implies humane attention to a marginalized people's pain and suffering which, compounded by social and cultural stigmas, strip them of their dignity. It's a noble cause, and causes as such should've constituted the majority of international campaigns which various governments and international institutions advocated over time. But in practice, most of the campaigns we see are less noble, to put it mildly – and in more blunt terms, marked with greed, thirst for power, and arrogance. How can we try to correct that course of action, and the mentality associated with it?

It's difficult to change the prevailing general course of human affairs, of treatments and behavior; it's always like a pendulum, moving from one extreme to the other and usually failing in its at-

tempt in worldly affairs, things will grow debased and return life to low ways of being. But I am not naive and am fully aware how hard it's to work towards higher consciousness. Just restructuring the world order through hierarchies of might and power will lead us nowhere. What's needed is a just world order, with spirituality taking front seat instead of crude materialism and consumerism; we should rely more on sacrifice and not on the easy and immediate satisfaction of human senses. Value-oriented education that fortifies our inner selves is paramount for nurturing politics of a different hue, that would treat the nations in the way benevolent and caring parents look after their children. Society without empathy, respect and acceptance of those that are different is not the kind of humanity we could be happy with.

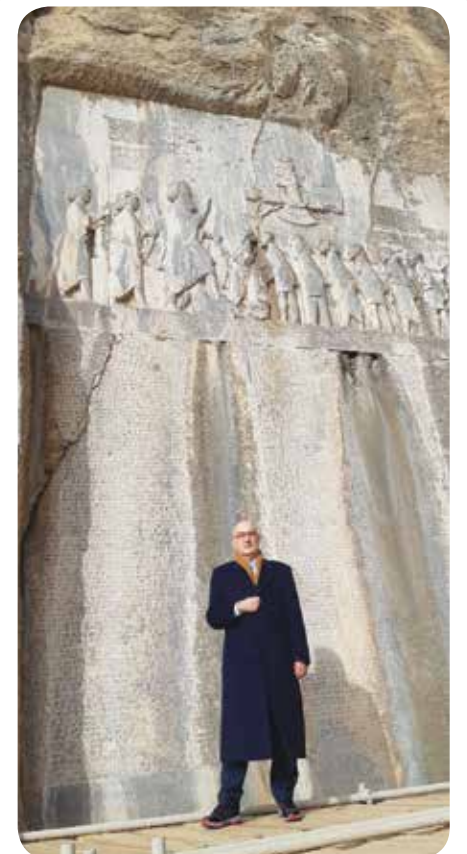
Since you were appointed as ambassador to Iran, you've been quite active in engaging the Iranian society. What common grounds do you see between Iran and Croatia to further develop their cooperation, bringing two nations closer together? And if you were to consult Iranian government in regards to cultural exchanges, what would be the most fascinating aspect of Iranians' life, culture, or history to your fellow Croatians?

First, it should be people to people interaction with emotional background of sophisticated, ancient and complex nature – each of our nations have a lot to contribute in that respect to the other.

Many in Iran and Croatia know about the old Iranian roots of Croat people. During Achaemenid times there was the kingdom of Harvatia (Harahvatia, or Arachosia in Greek), as an essential and allied part of great Persian Empire. It was located in what's today southwest Afghanistan, along Helmand River, including Hamun Lake and certain parts of today Iran. It was ruled by King Vivana, an ally of Darius the Great and his deputy and chief commander. The name of this kingdom provides the origin of the name of my country and my people today.

If you go to Apadana, in Persepolis, on the Stair of Nations one shall see the people from Harvatia bearing gifts in allegiance to the King of the Kings. The only European nation which calls its rulers 'ban', are Croats (so, ban Jelačić, or Kulin ban) which in Persian means 'custodian' or 'protector', someone who looks after his community or his people. Zarathustra in his Gathas mentions Harvatia twice, calling it a beautiful land with a lot of waters, ruled by the noble goddess Anahita, also scolding them for burying the dead instead as proper Zoroastrians exposing them to the vultures on the towers of silence.

Croats moved westward from there and founded White Croatia in today Ukraine, Russia, Poland...

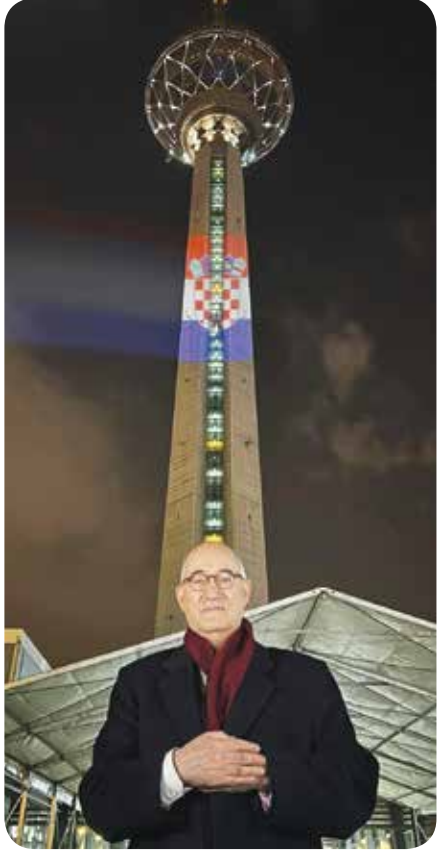


COURTESY OF THE CROATIAN EMBASSY IN TEHRAN
A visit to Bagastan, between Bisotun and Kermanshah, on November 25, 2021

Iran and Croatia have a lot of UNESCO registered sites, deep history and culture – it offers a great field for interaction. Croatia has given the world many important figures, to name Nikola Tesla as just one of them. Emotional bilateral experience that I have mentioned is an excellent base for furthering scientific, business and other kinds of partnership.

Iranian literature, with its exhilarating mystical line is the most appealing to me, not to mention Islamic art and architecture, and Yazd's contribution to important ecological deliberations. I have visited recently Teheran's Museum of Contemporary Art, an excellent exhibition of Islamic revolutionary art. We have also marked 30th anniversary of Iran's recognition of Croatia, as the first Asian state to do it. In Lisinski's Hall in Zagreb, I represented Croatian prime minister at the premiere of maestro Ali Alexander Rahbari's symphonic poem "Thus spoke Zarathustra Spitama," with Iranian young tenor Reza Fekri and Zagreb philharmonic and choir, dedicated to Croatian people; also in Teheran, few days later, in front of Milad Tower, I witnessed Croatian flag projection on this glorious architectural edifice.

I would suggest that the Zagreb philharmonic performs this beautiful piece in Teheran. I am sure it would be just as great a success here as it was in Zagreb.



COURTESY OF THE CROATIAN EMBASSY IN TEHRAN
Video projection of Croatian Flag on Milad Tower on March 15, 2022, commemorating the 30th anniversary of Iran recognition of Croatia's independence

*Ships sail far away,
carry off our loved ones
to faraway foreign lands,
ships sail far away.*

*They carry off our lives,
in chests of snow-white flour
and barrels of golden oil
to greedy foreign lands.*

*Ships sail far away,
and split our hearts with their prows,
what shall we do with the halves
in a faraway foreign land.*

Drago Štambuk