

# MY FIRST MEETING AND CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR MIHAJLO I. PUPIN

by Milos Rastovic

Mihajlo Idvorski Pupin (1858 – 1935) was a Serbian-American scientist, inventor, professor, writer, diplomat, humanist and, most importantly, a patriot. While living in the United States, he preserved a vitality and strength of his national spirit.

Like many immigrants from Europe, he came as a sixteen-year-old youth to the United States without knowledge of the English language or money. He worked hard while making his own road into the world of science that he described in his book "From Immigrant to Inventor." In 1924, his book was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize.

While building his scientific career, he never forgot his Serbian origin. He often advocated the importance of preserving Serbian ethnic identity and cultural heritage. He became an honorary Consular of the Kingdom of Serbia in 1911 and contributed greatly to the peace agreement in Paris in 1919 after World War I. He founded and supported many societies and organizations (Sloga, Svesna Srbadija, and Serbian National Defense) that, in turn, helped in the U.S. and the Serbian homeland.

In order to strengthen Serbian fraternal organizations and make them more efficient, he worked hard to unite them. Finally, societies Sloga, Sloboda and Svesna Srbadija united to the Serbian Orthodox Federation Srbobran later named the Serb National Federation in 1929. At this convention, Pupin became honorary president. Today, the Serb National Federation is the oldest Serbian Fraternal Benefit Society in North America. Since 1906, its official organ the *American Srbobran* remains the oldest continuously published Serbian newspaper in North America.

When Pupin became an honorary president of the Serb National Federation, Father Milovan Sundic from Lorain, Ohio, visited Pupin in New York. The *American Srbobran* published in Serbian a conversation between them on May 27, 1930 under the title "My First Meeting and Conversation with Professor Pupin." Father Sundic first asked Professor Pupin about our educational and religious opportunities in America.

#### About Serbian educational and religious opportunities, Pupin said:

"Our Old Country needs Serbian immigrants for many reasons. Like the rest of the South Slavonic people, Serbian immigrants proved on every occasion that their homeland lies in their hearts even in some foreign land.

"Today, our homeland needs many years of hard and creative work to economically recover itself to those heights to which our nation had arisen in heroism and patriotism while they were fighting for their freedom and unity.



"Our people have great virtues and high moral qualities, of which the greatest cultural nations have taken note and because of this they befriended us. Our people also have our own shortcomings, but these weaknesses are also shared by other nations who are more enlightened than we are. We live in America and Americans are great friends of our nation. This friendship is based on our virtues that are visibly distinguished in our nation. The late Woodrow Wilson, former president of the United States of America, was a very bright and clever statesman. He became a friend of our nation because he appreciated the great virtues of Serbs that they showed while fighting for their own and their brothers' freedom by blood.

"We cannot absolutely prevent our immigrant youth from Americanization, nor do we need to do that. However, we have to work so that our youth do not lose the good qualities of the Serbian people. First, these virtues will be necessary for our youth personally, and, second, to the American nation, and finally, their usefulness will, in some way and in some form, return to their homeland. The first educator of our youth should be a mother. I am today an American, and they gave me all the same honors as their own first sons. I finished my school here and gave myself to America and humankind. However, I have never forgotten that I am a Serb, nor I have stopped being a friend of the Serbian people, and I have always worked for their benefit. My Serbian heritage was

no obstacle for Americans accepting me as their own born son. My only teacher of national character to my soul was my late mother. In my early childhood, my mother told me all that I am and imparted to me that I remain forever what I am, a Serb and an Orthodox Christian. This fact neither bothered Americans nor will it bother our youth who will be completely Americanized.

"The people who have been invited to educate and lead our youth in religious and national spirit are our priests and national fraternal societies with dioceses and federations. They should take care of our youth, to instruct them in the right ways, and as sons of an American nation, remain loyal to their faith and friends of the Serbian people. Even if our youth are completely Americanized, they should not forget their origin, nor disdain those great virtues which our people possess and that are recognized and respected by all cultural nations, especially Americans. The American national soul will benefit from the infusion of the great virtues of our Serbian youth, whom we must share with America due to circumstances. It will be useful to our homeland in the Balkans to nurture the friendship and fidelity of our young Americans and their descendants. Our homeland has today a great interest to help our society, especially the dioceses and clergy who serve our immigrants, to build and establish our religious and educational institutions so that they realize they are necessary and will enshrine them as if their own saints.

In other words, until they feel the need to wholeheartedly support them."

#### About himself Pupin said:

"When I came to this country I was wondering what I should do. Americans are very fast people. They are fast at work, fast in words, and fast in deed. When our Europeans and the rest came to America, they did not give the decision a second thought, but when they arrived, they were immediately running to keep up with Americans. Americans were faster, and our people were behind them or they were tired and failed. I was thinking how I could compete with Americans. My legs were weak for a race. I could not run, but I felt power in my brain and mind, and I began to compete with Americans with this organ and showed them my strength. Even today my legs are not serving me very well, but my brain is faithful to me. I still feel young. I still want to be a young. I preserve myself from old age and hope that I will a long time preserve myself."

#### About God, soul and faith Pupin said:

"Among all planets the Earth is one of the smallest, but scientists say none of the other planets has developed life like Earth. Look at the sun and all other suns how are they so shiny and great. But, there is no life there as there is here on the Earth. Something that our Earth gives power and life to is our soul, our human soul. God gave us human souls and human minds. When you look at animals, you can see what human life would be without soul, a real divine soul. If that soul is without faith, what kind people we would be? What kind of Earth would we have? A soul without faith in God is not good and does not exist as a soul.

"We know a lot of laws of science. We should not consider anything on Earth to be trifling. Everything is composed from small, little things. But, these petty things harmoniously decorated under the proper laws compose very big and huge things. We as scientists know a lot of laws—how these tiny components unify and also how they are torn apart. However, we also know that there is one great and wise law that we cannot reach by our mind. This law makes us dependent on it and for this reason, we should be obedient to that law. I repeat, our spirit, sense, and soul without faith has no value and does not represent anything. With faith, they present great force, power and size. Therefore, faith introduces us to the most unknowable of laws and its great legislator – God."

Father Milovan Sundic who interviewed Professor Pupin concluded the following: "It is hard for any nation if they do not have these big sons like our Pupin. If we follow his [Pupin's] wise advice, we will never be lost in this country--neither for faith and homeland, nor for ourselves."

*This Interview was translated from Serbian into English by Milos Rastovic*