

AN INTERVIEW with MILOS RASTOVIC

The Serb National Federation is the oldest Serbian fraternal organization in the United States. From the time of its foundation, it has been helping and supporting Serbian people on the North American continent in order to preserve Serbian ethnic and religious identity.

On a recent trip to Serbia, Milos Rastovic, SNF Cultural Outreach Coordinator spoke about the history, activities, and goals of the Savez on the Program of the Diaspora, National Radio Television of Serbia (RTS). While Rastovic was in Belgrade, he also participated in the conference "Days of the Diaspora" at Singidunum University, speaking about the long-running mission of the Serb National Federation that benefits Serbian people through different kinds of help for individuals and organizations. Rastovic said the Diaspora should build bridges between themselves and the homeland, disregarding the distances and different continents on which they live, and in that way, he demonstrated how we are one unique national being.

Following is an excerpt from the interview on RTS:

The Serb National Federation, the oldest Serbian fraternal society in the United States, has certainly passed through different periods and experiences. How would you describe from this temporal distance to our readers the most important moments in the work of this organization and by what principles and goals do they continue?

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, Serbian immigrants came to America in large numbers because America in those times was the "promised land" offering economic prosperity, and political and religious freedom. Many immigrants worked difficult physical jobs in mines and the steel industry without any protection or financial stability for themselves and their families. In order to protect immigrants in their work, Sava Hajdin with the support of Serbian-American scientist and inventor Nikola Tesla founded the Serbian Orthodox Federation Srbobran, and became its first president in 1901. Hajdin wanted this organization to become the center of Serbdom and Svetosavlje in America, or the spiritual home of Serbian immigrants.

Mihajlo I. Pupin, Serbian-American scientist, inventor, and diplomat, worked for a long time to unite all Serbian fraternal organizations and make them stronger and more efficient in their work. As a result, the societies named Sloga, Sloboda and Svesna Srbadija were united with the Serbian Orthodox Federation Srbobran and became the Serb National Federation at a joint convention in 1929. At this convention Pupin became the honorary president of the Serb National Federation and was followed by Nikola Tesla in 1935.

During World War I and World War II, the Serb National Federation



Sava Hajdin, founder of the SNF

helped the homeland by political engagement and collection of humanitarian aid. During World War II, members of the SNF collected money to buy a bombardier which was named the "American Serbian" and was used in the fight against Nazi Germany. During the 1930s, the SNF assisted many scholars who went to study at universities in Serbia. One of them was George Voinovich who later went on to participate in the rescue of over 500 downed Allied pilots in Pranjani, Serbia in 1944 in cooperation with General Draza Mihailovic's troops.

The conference "Days of the Diaspora" was held on July 7, 2016 at the University Singidunum, Belgrade. You talked about Serbian-Americans and the relationship between the homeland and the Serbian Diaspora. How much have Serbian-Americans contributed to the development of American society and what is the conclusion of the conference in Belgrade?

At the beginning of the 19th Century, Djordje Sagic, later known as George Fisher, was one of many adventurers who arrived in America. He became

such an important person in the United States that the National Museum in Texas still preserves his picture today. He fought for independence in Texas and Mexico; he was a judge in California and an Honorary Consul of Greece. In 2014, at the celebration of 200 Years of Serbs in America, Sagic's descendants were present. This fact shows the strong connection with roots and heritage even after 200 years. Though our ancestors were sailing off to some distant worlds, their descendants still try to be connected with their roots in the same way today.

In addition to Tesla and Pupin who gave the greatest contributions to the world of science, today we have a great number of academic experts in different fields of knowledge and work which the homeland could use for the benefits of all. In this context, the conclusion of the conference "Days of the Diaspora" is to create a platform that can improve communication between the homeland and the Serbian Diaspora, enabling Serbian descendants to better understand their roots, to learn our Serbian language, to build networks through artistic, cultural,



Front page of the first issue of the American Srbobran, January 1906

“If we follow the path of our great people, there is hope for us.” – *Milos Rastovic*

and athletic events and have a common cooperation and exchange of students between the homeland and abroad.

At the conference I also stressed that during World War I thousands of Serbian volunteers from the United States went to fight for Serbian freedom; 55% of them died defending Serbia. The cavalry of the Serbian nation during World War I and the sacrifices they gave for freedom and independence are the foundation in which we should build our common future. If we proved in our history that we can persist in fighting for an ideal of freedom, in the same way in peace we can build bridges between the Serbian Diaspora and homeland while disregarding continents where we live, thus showing we are one unique national being. Uniting Serbs from different generations within the Diaspora with the homeland is the only way we will survive as a nation. If we follow the path of Tesla, Pupin, St. Bishop Nikolaj Velimirovic, Novak Djokovic and Emir Kusturica we can be sure that our future will not be lost.

You are the screenwriter for the documentary “Tesla’s People” directed by Zeljko Mirkovic. In what direction were you thinking when you wrote the screenplay and what this movie should show?

The movie was initiated by the Tesla Science Foundation of Philadelphia, PA who have been working for over two years on this project. Many Serbs who contributed to the United States and the world are interviewed. The main idea is to show that Serbian-Americans have preserved their ethnic and religious identity on this continent for more than 200 years. When Serbian immigrants came to America, they brought something more valuable than money. They brought their talent and readiness to sacrifice for the benefit of all. The movie describes what they achieved through their work - from Sagic, Tesla, and Pupin to the most important people of today. It also stressed the importance of building a bridge to the homeland. It would be great to finish the movie next year. There are some parts of the movie which will be filmed in the Midwest and West.



Honorary SNF member Novak Djokovic, World Tennis Champion, receiving his plaque from Milos Rastovic



Milos Rastovic at the “Days of the Diaspora” conference, University of Singidunum, Belgrade

The American Srbobran is the oldest Serbian newspaper in the American Continent which has been continuously published since 1906. How would you describe to our readers this very important publication of Serbian-Americans? Who is editing the newspaper and what is their policy?

The *American Srbobran* is the official publication of the Serb National Federation. At the beginning the *American Srbobran* was a daily written exclusively in Cyrillic. During the 1930s, they added an English section to attract the first generation of Serbian immigrants for whom English was the native language. Many famous Serbian novelists wrote for the *American Srbobran* such as Jovan Ducic, Milos Crnjanski, Vasa Mihailovich and others. Today, the *American Srbobran* is published bi-monthly and it has Serbian section written in Cyrillic and English section. Aleksandar Petrov is editor of the Serbian Section and Sandi Radoja is editor of the English section. From the beginning, the *American Srbobran* has covered activities of SNF members and events in the United States and homeland such as socio-economic problems, cultural and athletic events, Serbian parishes and churches, and other subjects of interest to its members.

With which organizations and institutions in Serbia does the Serb National Federation cooperate and in what fields? What can be developed, improved and on what should we insist?

The Serb National Federation cooperates with institutions of cultural importance in Serbia such as the National Library of Serbia, Matica Srpska and other institutions of great cultural importance. Recently, the SNF established cooperation with the Andric Institute in Andrićtown, Bosnia and Herzegovina and we are very proud of that. Additionally, mutual economic and political cooperation should be developed in order to be more present in the homeland and in the United States.

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Biography

Milos Rastovic was born in Sombor where he finished elementary and high school. He earned his Bachelor Degree at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Philosophy with thesis “Eternal Recurrence of the Same in Nietzsche’s Philosophy.” He worked as a Professor of Philosophy, Sociology and Civic Education in Technical School Sombor (2002 – 2009), Agriculture School Sombor (2005 – 2009), Technical School Apatin (2004 – 2006), and Technical School Odzaci (2004 – 2005).

In 2011, he earned a Master Degree at Duquesne University, McAnulty College & Graduate School of Liberal Arts, Department of Philosophy, Pittsburgh, PA.

Since 2011, he has worked as the Cultural Outreach Coordinator for the Serb National Federation and writes for the *American Srbobran* newspaper. He is on the Board of Directors of the Tesla Science Foundation in Philadelphia, PA.

Djokovic and Kusturica with Pupin and Tesla

Through its history and even today, the Serb National Federation supports Serbian Orthodox churches and children church camps, students through the SNF Scholarship Program, and athletic, cultural and social events in order to preserve Serbian ethnic and religious identity. After Pupin and Tesla, Novak Djokovic, Serbian Tennis Player from Serbia, became an honorary member of the SNF in 2015 because of his athletic achievements, humanitarian work and his positive influence on the reputation of Serbs in the world. Emir Kusturica, Serbian movie director and founder of Andrićtown, became an honorary member of the SNF on Vidovdan, June 28, 2016 in recognition of his contribution to the world of cinematography, ultimate artistic achievement and for preserving Serbian cultural tradition and heritage.