



IN MEMORIAM: DAVOR KAPETANIĆ

Professor Emeritus
(1928-2023)

Davor Kapetanić, Professor Emeritus of Slavic Languages and Literatures and a former Chair of the Department, died on February 13, 2023, in Edmonds, Washington. He was 94 years old.

Born in Zagreb, Croatia in 1928, Prof. Kapetanić's first engagement with UW was as a Fulbright Visiting Scholar during the 1970-1971 academic year, during which he taught courses in BCMS (then Serbo-Croatian) language and literatures. He then returned to Croatia, where he resumed his former position as a senior scientific researcher at the Institute for Literature and Theater Studies of the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts (since renamed Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts), while at the same time completing and defending his PhD dissertation in Croatian literature at the University of Zagreb.

During that interim year (1971-1972), the UW Slavic Department obtained approval to recruit for a new, tenure-track professorship in BCMS language and literature, a process it concluded when it appointed Davor Kapetanić to the position. He arrived in Seattle in fall 1973 together with his wife Dr. Breda Kogoj-Kapetanić, a specialist in comparative literature with particular strengths in French,

English and Croatian literatures. Davor and Breda began tandem careers teaching at UW that reached into the 1990s, Davor in Slavic Languages and Breda in Comparative Literature.

From July 1977 to March 1984 Davor served as Chair of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures during one of the most expansive arcs in its history. Among his legacies to UW was the establishment in 1984, at the behest of the UW provost, of an ongoing campus-wide exchange of faculty and PhD candidates with the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia that continues to this day. Recognized as a leading authority on the work of Croatian novelist and playwright Miroslav Krleža, in 2000 he was elected a corresponding member of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (HAZU).

After their retirement in 1993, Davor and Breda divided their time between their homes in Seattle, Croatia and Slovenia, but they stayed in touch with their UW colleagues and students. Below we share remarks contributed by a number of them.

Gordana Crnković (Professor and Chair, UW Slavic Languages and Literatures)

I had known of Professor Kapetanić's work long before I got to know him as a person when I interviewed, many years ago, for the position of Assistant Professor in the Slavic Department. Davor was a South Slavic expert and a faculty member who asked the hardest questions after my job talk on early and lesser-known texts by the Yugoslav winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, Ivo Andrić. Despite this serious (and not entirely comfortable) probing, I could not help but appreciate Professor Kapetanić, from the first, as a person of rare integrity, intelligence, and kindness. We came upon one topic, during this visit, on which I strongly and unequivocally disagreed with him. I remember the smile he gave me, which told me it was OK to hold my ground and that he would not take it against me but, on the contrary, that he respected this.

Once I started working at the Slavic Department, and once Davor left the department to enjoy retirement with his wife Breda Kogoj-Kapetanić, Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature at the UW, we connected from time to time and talked about literature, politics, and the cultural scene in Croatia and the whole post-Yugoslav region. Davor had a wealth of knowledge and a talent for seeing through the appearances to the core of a situation, and for saying things in a way that explained and illuminated them to me. He was wise, stoical, and always with a fine sense of humor. The last time we met he was sad that he could not any more travel, on account of a medical condition, to his beloved, native city of Zagreb. “Samo da hodam po onim ulicama...” -- “If I could only walk those streets...”

Davor Kapetanić was a man of substance who gave a lot to the world. His departure is felt deeply; he will be missed.

Ron LeBlanc (PhD 1984, UW Slavic Languages and Literatures; Professor Emeritus, University of New Hampshire)

I had the great good fortune of attending two of the courses that Professor Davor Kapetanić used to teach here at the UW.

As I recall, the first one (I've long forgotten what the course number or course title were) was a general introduction to literary theory and criticism. I remember that from the very first day I was highly impressed with Professor Kapetanić's intelligence and his breadth of knowledge about the subject matter. I also remember that this was the first class that I was taking as a graduate student and that I was feeling that I might have been in over my head. To Professor Kapetanić's credit, he seems to have anticipated that most -- if not all -- of the students in this course might well be feeling the very same way as I was. In any event, he quickly allayed our fears, displaying a real knack for explaining the meaning of terms that we were not familiar with. And he also used humor as a way to calm our fears and lessen our apprehensions. I wouldn't go so far

as to say that Professor Kapetanić made literary theory and criticism "fun" (nor do I think that he should have done that), but he certainly did much to help demystify the subject matter in this course.

I also can't recall specifically the course number and title of the other course that I took with Professor Kapetanić, but I do know that I took it sometime during the 1982-1983 academic year and that the course was designed by Hazard Adams of the Department of Comparative Literature as a seminar whereby an advanced graduate student (all-but-dissertation) who was either majoring in English or matriculating in a language & literature department was paired off with a faculty member from the same department and they were to make a joint presentation on a literary critic or theorist in their field. I had just returned from an IREX-Fulbright academic year spent in the former Soviet Union (mainly in Moscow) researching the topic of my dissertation (the novels of Vasily Narezhny). Being paired off with Professor Kapetanić in this seminar and working with him to make a presentation was like a dream come true for me, for it allowed me to put in perspective not only my recent experiences abroad, but also my understanding of the ideas advanced by literary critics and theorists in the Slavic world, especially those of Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman. Professor Kapetanić served wonderfully as my mentor in this seminar, and I owed him a huge debt of gratitude for all that he taught me as his junior partner in this enterprise.

I have nothing but fond memories of my interactions at the UW with Professor Davor Kapetanić, both as a mentor and as a human being. I feel that I was privileged to have met him and to have worked with him. May he rest in peace.

Bob Ewen (PhD 1979, UW Slavic Languages and Literatures)

Prof. Jack Haney was infamous for keeping a bottle of either sherry, always quite presentable, or cognac behind three green books about shoulder height in the wall-to-wall bookcase of his almost cavernous

office. We never did find out how Jack had finagled those digs. As occasions required, Jack was never one to stint with the sherry, especially on a Friday afternoon.

One Friday afternoon Prof. Imre Boba [UW professor of history] and I were in Jack's office celebrating what I can't remember, each of us with a glass of sherry, when Davor knocked on the door. Out of well-practiced habit, Jack quickly and adroitly secreted the bottle and all three glasses in a desk drawer before inviting Davor in. Prof. Davor Kapetanić, then chairman of the department (as my memory serves), entered the office and gave us a long, slightly amused look. He casually walked to the bookcase, purposely touched the three green books, turned to us and said in his unfailingly cordial manner, "so what is it we are celebrating this afternoon, eh?"

Rosanne Gostovich Royer (MA 1976, UW International Studies, Russia and Eastern Europe)

They were both students at the University of Zagreb, where it was very hard to get admitted. It was easier to get in if you were a member of the Party, but they weren't, so you really had to be tops in your entrance exams and your high school achievements.

Breda was a graduate student in Comparative Literature. Davor was in Slavic Languages and Literatures.

It was 1951 and Tito and the Party had broken with the Soviet Union three years before. The Yugoslav government was trying various methods to demonstrate to the West that Yugoslavia was truly in a reform mode—that democratization was in the offing.

The University called together a group of graduate students to plan the organization of a new student publication. Davor and Breda were token appointments from their separate departments. They were not acquainted before this. They met for the first time at this gathering.

Breda said Davor made a great impression on her. Not only his good looks, but what he had to say, and she fell head over heels for him that day.

Davor said he entered the area where they were meeting. It was a room in a building with a balcony. Breda was a blonde then. She was leaning over the balcony smoking. The sun was hitting her hair in a most dazzling way and Davor said to himself, "That is a good-looking woman." Later she demonstrated her intelligence as well. They left the meeting together and started to see each other after each meeting.



Breda and Davor

Harlan Kit Adams (MA 1976, UW Slavic Languages and Literatures)

Davor was always an enthusiastic and helpful conversationalist in Croatian. There were a few of us who spoke at a quite high level... Davor's erudition and native knowledge of the literary language and the people who functioned in its world was beyond helpful. Its importance in raising my level of knowledge can't be overstated. Most of the papers I undertook were on topics Davor suggested. For example, when I took [UW historian] Prof. Peter Sugar's class in Eastern European history, Davor

helped me get set up to write a paper on the writers associated with the Croatian Peasant Party in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. When it came time to choose a dissertation topic, Davor again helped me out. I undertook a study of the influence on the Croatian literary language of the Kajkavian dialect and urban jargon as spoken in Zagreb. Davor helped me get an IREX to study in Zagreb for half a year and helped me with all kinds of invaluable contacts not only in Zagreb, but in Belgrade and other cities. This was in 1979. Sadly, my research stalled, and I never finished the dissertation. If Davor was disappointed, which he certainly had every right to be, he was exceedingly gracious about it. It did not seem to affect our relationship. Davor was the kind of professor who was invariably collegial with younger people undertaking a life of study and research. This was especially true of the graduate students in the UW Slavic Department... Although Davor remained a rather private person, even with the students he was closest to, he was always extremely cordial and charming. He had a hearty laugh which he employed often in the deployment of a great sense of humor. ■

*With thanks also to alumni **Jim Hoath** (MA 1980, UW International Studies, Russia and Eastern Europe), **Michael Seraphinoff** (PhD 1993, UW Slavic Languages and Literatures), **Alma Plancich** (Alumna, UW Slavic Languages and Literatures), and **Norman McCormick** (Professor Emeritus, UW Mechanical Engineering)*

