

God's Promises Kept in Yugoslavia

*A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand,
but it shall not come near you.*

Psalm 91:7

Story and photos by Tom Price

Ljuban Bilbija had repeated that verse often since being sent to the Croatian front by his Serbian officers in the summer of 1992. After the fall of Communism, Yugoslavia had splintered apart into nationalistic sectors. Not quite 19-years-old, he had been a Christian for a year, and attended the Calvary Chapel in his hometown of Subotica before being drafted.

With less than two weeks of training, he had been made a tank commander and sent into the thick of the fighting. Tonight was especially bad as the shelling intensified. He and his comrades did not want to spend another sleepless night in the unbearable heat of their tank. They found shelter in an abandoned mansion.

Shells had blasted through the brick walls, leaving gaping holes in the wallpaper. Part of the first floor had collapsed into the basement. Three young soldiers sought out Ljuban. Knowing of his intense faith in Christ, they felt safest while close to him. Ljuban fell to his knees in prayer, asking the Lord to see them through this night.

The shelling relented. Ljuban awoke later, as something crawled over his feet. He realized that the smell coming from the basement was from rotting corpses. Feasting rats



Two children in a refugee camp gaze out at Ljuban as he ministers.

had ventured upstairs. He screamed and jumped to his feet. The startled soldiers grabbed their guns. Ljuban yelled that rats, not the enemy, had been their attackers.

“The regular Yugoslavian army was filled with boys like myself that should have been studying at the university and not in a war,” said Ljuban. “We did not want to be fighting with our former countrymen. But resistance to the draft meant years of confinement or possibly the firing squad.”

Economic prosperity in Yugoslavia before the war had made the fighting even more difficult to understand. When Communism fell, it was replaced with a deadly nationalistic fever that pitted three ethnic groups against each other: the Serbians, Croats, and Muslims. Leaders of the three groups—Milosevich, Tujman, and Isabagwich—made land and financial gains that would expand their borders. Ethnic groups in the minority in their areas faced discrimination, expulsion and worse.

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Left—Ljuban Bilbija, pastor of CC Subotica, prays with an elderly lady who needs peace from her nightmares.

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After a year of fighting, Ljuban was sent to Bosnia where his service time ended. A new soldier arrived to take command of his tank. Hours after his departure Ljuban learned that his tank had been shelled. The new commander was killed and the others were seriously injured. Shocked by the incident, Ljuban reflected that God had kept His promise of protection.

Years later, Ljuban found himself under attack again, this time from the air. NATO bombs fell in the nearby city of Novi Sad and later in Subotica. American-led forces were trying to dislodge Serbian troops from Kosovo through a relentless aerial campaign in Yugoslavia. As he returned, the borders closed behind him as he crossed over from Hungary. He felt the Lord lead him to comfort a frightened congregation at CC Subotica.

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Ljuban tries to talk to a shy little girl.



The children, living under harsh conditions in a nearby refugee camp, look forward to regular visits from the CC Subotica fellowship.



Ljuban, right, visits the former teenage hangout negatively dubbed “The Monkey Place” because of the youthful crowd who came to the Lord there through the ministry of Calvary Chapel over a dozen years ago. He comforts an old friend in need of prayer.



CC Subotica, pictured above, has recently undergone a renovation project on its interior increasing its ability to serve the community.



The city government of Subotica is rebuilding a downtown area known as “The Monkey Place.” It was previously used by musicians and public orators to air their opinions in the waning days of the Communist regime.

“There were some new Christians in the congregation that were bitter toward the Americans,” said Ljuban. “The majority of us realized we were suffering because of the policies of our government; which none of us supported but were powerless to change.” The local media accused the church of being a haven for U.S. spies because of its contact with Americans throughout the years.

Yugoslavia

Before Ljuban came to Christ, his sister, Snowy, had met American Christian Mike Harris, one of the first CC missionaries sent to Yugoslavia. Ljuban kept his distance, but was intrigued by the joy these new believers shared with one another. Finally he ventured to the church’s open-air meeting place in the center of town. City residents ruefully called it “The Monkey Place,” because it was a hangout for teens.

“The missionaries from America impacted my life in dramatic ways,” said Ljuban. “Through their example I felt God leading me to continue the work they began.”

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Zoli Vogel, right, was the Assistant Pastor at CC Subotica. He and his wife, Tanja, recently moved to Belgrade to assist in the CC church plant begun by Kris and Renata Rizanji.



Tibor Varga, right, enjoys participating in the Children's Ministry. He has begun a Calvary Chapel in Cantaver.



While Yugoslavian cities are very modern, the villages maintain a vestige of times past.



Downtown Subotica has walking streets paved with cobblestone that accentuate its historic grandeur.

CC Belgrade

As NATO bombs rained down upon Serbia, Kris and Renata Rizanji, from CC Subotica, huddled in darkened bomb shelters in their adopted town of Belgrade. They had ample opportunity to share the love of Jesus Christ. People were worried and would listen. Where would they go if they died?

While U.S. munitions exploded in the capital city, Kris and Renata invited Serbians to a church that began in America.

Kris had journeyed to Belgrade several years before to help translate for missionaries from CC Siegen, Germany. The weeklong outreach in the Yugoslavian capital touched Kris and Renata. They had grown up at the Cal-

vary in Subotica, close to the Hungarian border. The condition of Biblical understanding in Belgrade was appalling to them.

“We were struck by how little anyone knew about God,” said Kris. He felt that the Lord gave them the vision to return. The teenagers were from a similar background as his—

splintered families ruined by alcohol and disillusioned by years of Communist rule.

The first CC missionaries to Yugoslavia had helped open his eyes to the Lord when he was a young teenager running rampant on the streets. Taiwo, a Nigerian engineering student, had shared with him about God’s grace and love. Kris and his buddies mocked the Christians. Later that evening he was convicted as he read about Jesus’ crucifixion in the Gospel of John.

Zoli Vegel, an assistant pastor an worship leader at CC Subotica, and his wife, Tanja, moved to Belgrade this past September to assist. All of the missionaries are worshipping as a team and listening for the direc-

tion the Lord wants them to go. They began praying earnestly for the city and its people.

“God has brought several young men to the Bible study that have a real desire to learn about Him,” said Zoli. The missionaries befriended them; which has given them a great opportunity to talk about the Bible and answer their questions.

“Some of the new believers are growing like an express train,” said Zoli. “This has been a great encouragement for all the missionaries here in Belgrade.”

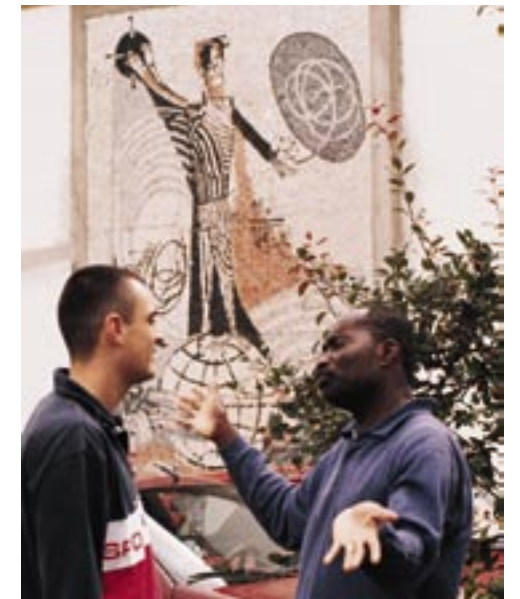
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Kris Rizanji, left, ministers in Belgrade. Axel Hagen, right, joined him as a missionary from CC Siegen Germany.



Pastor Taiwo Onasoga, CC Backa Topola, ministers at the annual Yugoslavian conference in Novi Sad. His involvement with CC began twelve years ago.



Pastor Taiwo came from Nigeria to study engineering but answered a call to the ministry.

CC Backa Topola

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.

Psalm 32: 8

Taiwo Onasoga was introduced to the Calvary Chapel movement at the Monkey Place in Subotica, the outdoor hangout for teens. The Nigerian had moved to Yugoslavia for his degree in engineering. He had given his life to the Lord before leaving Africa.

In Yugoslavia, Taiwo met Tibor Varga, who invited him to listen to the Americans that were teaching the Bible at "The Monkey Place." An American pastor, Brian Brodersen, was sharing the Gospel, despite warnings from the Communist government. Brian returned to the U.S. and encouraged young missionaries to pray about beginning outreaches there. Mike Harris was one man who had caught the vision.



Pastor Daniel Kuranji and his wife Vera, bottom right, host the annual Yugoslavian CC conference at Novi Sad Christian Fellowship. The Calvary Chapel style of worship and verse-by-verse teaching was adopted after their first exposure to it in 1992. Daniel began using Pastor Chuck Smith's teaching through the Bible.

Dorde Blae is hugged by a friend as his daughter, Silvija Kempel, right, cries tears of joy. Her father had just asked Christ into his life after many years of rejecting anything to do with the Gospel.

Taiwo and Tibor assisted Mike Harris as he began the first CC church in Yugoslavia. "I was the happiest person in the whole world," said Taiwo. "Many kids were dedicating their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ every single night."

They traveled to nearby towns and witnessed to young people. Taiwo met Zsuzsa, who was from the nearby village of Topola. They later married, and he was encouraged to begin a new church in her hometown. Tibor Varga began CC Csantaver, in a nearby community. ↔

CC Belgrade

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Sinisa, right, from CC Subotica, joins the worship team from Backa Topola at the annual Yugoslavian conference in Novi Sad.

