

*Essay**Received: 17 January 2017*

Novica Randelović: Diary of a collaboration

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In summer 1980 I was appointed as The British Council Lektor at the Primary Teacher Training College (Viša Pedagoška Škola) in Prizren, Kosovo. I had specifically chosen that particular Lektor post out of various that were offered me (Priština, Niš, Skopje, Belgrade) because of what I already knew about the natural history of the area and the Serbian monasteries.

I had started studying botany at the age of 12, written my first article and given my first public lecture aged 16, and had articles published in *Watsonia* and the *Alpine Garden Society Journal* by the age of 27. And as well as 25 years in the UK, I has also spent 2 years in northern Italy, honing my alpine and Mediterranean botanical skills. Thus when I arrived in Prizren I was ready for a new experience with the Balkan flora.

Of course, I was fairly badly equipped for this in terms of botanical field guides. I had Polunin's *Flowers of Europe*, Polunin & Everard's *Trees & Bushes of Europe*, and various UK, northern European and Mediterranean guides, though this was fortunately soon augmented by Polunin's *Flowers of Greece & the Balkans*, which came out in 1980, and I bought when home in the UK in summer 1981. So I did the best I could. I should say that as well as flowers, I was also studying any other wildlife that came my way, especially birds and butterflies, for which I had adequate books for the region.

My first finds of local Crocuses came on 17.03.81, when I discovered a lilac-flowered species with a netted corm, which I misidentified as *Crocus reticulatus*. Polunin (1980) told me that *Crocus*

dalmaticus, which it later turned out to be, was in the Velebit mountains, so I didn't consider it. This turned out to be an important find, extending the known range of the species considerably. I also found it at nearby Landovica. And so I trawled the Prizren area, Kosovo, the mountains around finding many, many new and interesting flowers, besides the first *Crocus*. I also found *Crocus chrysanthus* on Dulje between Prizren and Priština in spring 1982.

But then I left Prizren and moved to Niš University to be British Council Lektor there, starting in September 1982. I was by this time living with a Serbian Lektor in English, and it was she who found Novica Randelovic for me. She was travelling on a bus between Priština and Niš in February 1983, when she overheard two gentlemen talking about flowers. She interrupted them and explained my situation – British amateur botanist, no contacts with local botanists, could they help? And Novica – one of the gentlemen! – did. And so on 25.02.83, I drove down to his home in Doljevac to meet Novica, show him some of my botanical work, and discuss flowers with him, not least Crocuses, in which we soon found we were both very interested. He told me about the Jelašnica and Sičevo Gorges west of Niš, and I visited both on the next two days, finding *Crocus adami* in flower as he'd suggested. Then on 11.03.83, Novica and I went out into the field for the first time together. He took me to Seličevica to see *Crocus alexandrii*, amongst other things. It was the start of a long, happy and fruitful period of collaborative botanical work. I was very pleased when Novica spoke to my partner

after that first meeting and said ‘I thought you said he was an amateur – he really knows a lot!’

And so the idea gradually took shape that we would work to revise the information on the Genus *Crocus* in Serbia, but also do lots of other botany together outside the spring and autumn *Crocus*-flowering seasons. This list will give you an idea of the intensity of our field work:

1983: 11.03: Seličevica; 13.03: Rača; 24.04: Rujan Planina / Pohor Pčinjski; 15.05 Stolovi; 29.05: Ostrozub; 05.06 Suva Planina; 15.10: Rujan Planina;

1984: 03.03: Vučje; 18.03: Bujanovac-Preševo; 24.03: Trgovište; 01.04: Bujanovac-Preševo; 15.04: Vlasinsko jezero; 03.06: Preševo; 10.06: Basara; 04.07: Vlasinsko jezero; 20.10: Trgovište / Radovnica;

1985: 17.03: Velika Kopašnica / Velika Grabovnica / Vučje; 24.03: Prosek / Sićevo / Staničenje; 03.04: Rujan Planina; 06.04: Trnava; 27.04: Subotinac; 03.05: Radovnica / Novo Selo; 19.05: Vidlič / Basara; 08.06: Svrlijig; 14.06: Subotinac; 22.09: Subotinac;

1986: 08.03: Konjuh; 15.03: Preševo / Rujan Planina / Bujanovac / Kopašnica; 22.03: Preševo / Katlanovo / Prilep / Pletvar / Belavodna / Prasad; 30.03: Skopje: Kitka / Skopska Crna Gora; 02.04: Staničenje; 05.04: Vrska Čuka; 09.04: Subotinac; 12.04: Vlasotinsko Jezero; 23.04: Šar Planina (Stojkova Kuća / Prevalac) / Prizren / Landovica / Beli Drim Gorge / Pojata / Štimlje.

My involvement in the fieldwork stopped then, because in August 1986 my six year limit of time in Yugoslavia was up, and I moved to Milan, Italy to work at The British Council there. I returned to Serbia each holiday up until the wars began in 1990, and so met Novica from time to time. The last time we met face-to-face was on 26.08.89. However, we kept in close touch, because from December 1988 we were working on our book *The Genus Crocus L. in Serbia* which was published by SANU, Belgrade which I finally got a copy of in October 1990.

The fieldwork listed above was often done in conjunction with other botanists, most frequently Spas Sotirov and Vlastimir Stamenković. We drove

everywhere either in Novica’s yellow Citroen Dyane, or my red Renault 4TL; in fact, we often used my car because in those days petrol was issued using coupons, and locals could only have so many per month, while foreigners could buy as many as they wanted (at a higher rate, of course!)... so I always had plenty.

Many of the places listed above were visited primarily to look for Crocuses, and repeat visits were to check on species we knew about. Others were general botanizing expeditions aimed at deepening knowledge about the flora of southern parts of Serbia. The various visits to Subotinac were for a project on the flora of oil shale, which I presented at a Symposium in Belgrade in June 1986. A number of articles were published in different places describing our finds. Of course, I have not listed the numerous meetings and phone calls that Novica and I had to talk over our finds, examine material, check the books, especially with reference to the new species we found for science, *Crocus rujanensis* Randjelović et Hill, first seen on 18.03.84.

So who was this Novica Randjelović that I shared so much time, so many car journeys, so much foot-slogging over rough terrain, so many cups of coffee, and so much discussion with over a period of three years? First of all, he was a kind and generous man, someone who was able to accept this younger, enthusiastic foreigner into his home and make him feel welcome, and that in a time when foreigners were still widely treated with suspicion. Secondly, he was someone who wore his knowledge lightly and with humility – he never wanted to push what he knew at you to show it off; rather, it was there as a constant resource. Thirdly, he was endlessly curious and enthusiastic, always wanting to do new projects, discover new plants in different areas. I appreciated all of these characteristics greatly. We had a lot of fun on all those trips as well as doing a lot of serious work, too. I regret that things ended as they did. The wars came, and I never got back to Niš. However, the bond I feel to Novica has remained a deep and important part of me.

I salute him and thank him on his 80th birthday. May there be many more.