

VLADIMIR M. LUGONJA 1898-1977

Founder, Serbian Singing Federation



Imagine our Serbian churches without choirs? Imagine the beautiful musical culture of the Serbs disappearing into non-existence? This could have happened had it not been for a man who devoted his entire life to a cause – the preservation of Serbian music on the North American continent.

As the Serbian Singing Federation celebrates its 75th Anniversary, it is only fitting and proper that we devote these pages to the man who was responsible for the creation of America's greatest Serbian cultural organization, the Serbian Singing Federation – the late Vladimir M. Lugonja.

He was one of the most admired men among the Serbian people on this continent and the first among us to foresee the urgent need for a national organization which could serve as a pivotal force to deter the demise of Serbian music, both secular and religious. In 1931 when America was reeling from financial devastation caused by the stock market crash, Lugonja decided it was time for Serbian youth in America to start singing. With his unflagging determination and the aid of several people the Serbian Singing Federation was born. As incongruous as it may seem for a man to invest his life's energy into the

simple act of singing at a time when the world was rocked by economic disaster, it is no less incongruous that the very man to do so would come from the simplest of beginnings and later rise to head a large international organization whose goals and principles are truly lofty.

Vladimir M. Lugonja was born February 8, 1898 in Chemerno, one of the smallest villages in Hercegovina, a region in west-central former Yugoslavia, the son of Marko and Savka (nee Sokolovich) Lugonja. Vlajko attended public school in Gacko for two years, this being the only formal Serbian education he was fortunate to obtain before immigrating to the United States.

Vlajko came to Chicago, Illinois, April 12, 1907 with his father, a former merchant and political refugee and his sister, Radojka. They came to live with an uncle, Acim Lugonja, a very active member of the Chicago Serbian community. Another sister, Draginja remained in Europe to be cared for by her grandmother.

A few years after his arrival he was one of a group of boys and young men who organized and played in the oldest tamburitza orchestra in the United States – “Srbadija.” Vlajko played the biserica. The orchestra was not interested in material wealth; they only played for the love of Serbian music and donated any money received to the Church. In these early unselfish acts by a young boy, a pattern of his life arose which propelled the man through his adult years on an unswerving course. Vlajko submerged his own personal identity in a crusade to preserve the culture of the people who spawned him.

At the age of fifteen, Vlajko became the youngest member to join the Branko Radicevich Choir. Because of his high lyric tenor voice, there was a question as to whether Director Arno Mario Hess would allow him to continue singing in the choir, as his voice did not blend with the remainder of the choir. Mr. Steva Bogdanovich had recruited Vlajko into the choir when there was a shortage of tenors.

Vlajko's sister, Radojka married Christ Petrouleas of Detroit, a restauranteer and moved to Detroit to join him in that business. The father, Marko, soon followed her. After a few years, Vlajko, lonely for his family moved to Detroit where he lived with his sister and brother-in-law for several years.

From 1920 to 1936, he lived in Detroit, Michigan. Due to his early experiences in Chicago, he soon became lonesome for the singers he had left behind. Rather than living in regret for a past that was lost, he quickly manifested a personality trait that also became a hallmark of this man. He decisively took action to change the future as he thought it should be. He rallied his new male friends and organized Detroit's first choir, then known as “Philip Visnich.” This choir discontinued singing because of lack of music and communication with other Serbian groups. In 1930, he again organized the present choir in Detroit, “Ravanica.”

The continued success of this choir and all other choirs in the Serbian Singing Federation (SSF) was due in great measure to his efforts in founding the Serbian Singing Federation in 1931. The Federation consisted originally of only five choirs. This movement brought the Serbian young people closer to their Serbian Eastern Orthodox Church and the Serbian culture than any other movement. The success of the federation can readily be attributed, first to Mr. Lugonja's foresight in realizing the great need for such an organization, and secondly to his perseverance in creating the interest of the original five choirs. He made many personal sacrifices in traveling and organizing choirs wherever the opportunity arose. It is apparent in viewing these events that Vljako was able to call upon energy reserves that are not readily accessible to most men. He was indefatigable.

No choir can exist long by itself. Armed with this insight, Vljako persisted in his efforts to organize a national federation of choirs. His series of twelve articles in the "Srbobran," awakened so much interest in his Serbian brothers and sisters that they quickly responded to his ideas with wholehearted support. Vljako was greatly encouraged and called a conference of "lovers of Serbian music" for March, 1931 at the Christopher House in Chicago. In October of 1931, the Serbian Singing Federation was formally organized as a completely independent non-profit organization, and the Headquarters until 1936 were in the city of Highland Park, a suburb of Detroit, Michigan. At the first SSF Convention, Mr. Lugonja was elected Executive Secretary, a position he retained until the year 1962. Petar Sekulovich of Gary, Indiana (father of actor Karl Malden) was elected the first president of the SSF. Under Mr. Lugonja's guidance, the first singing festival was held in Akron, Ohio, Memorial Day weekend, 1936 with sixteen Serbian choirs participating.

Traveling throughout the country, he personally organized choirs and raised the membership of the SSF to thirty member choirs before World War II broke out. Immediately after the cessation of hostilities, he continued with added vigor in his efforts on behalf of the SSF and the membership continued to increase.

In 1937, Mr. Lugonja went on a tour of Yugoslavia with a group of American Serbs. This tour was sponsored by our Serb National Federation. While touring Yugoslavia, Mr. Lugonja met with many living composers as well as with families of deceased composers, and as a result collected a wealth of music. As a result of this early pilgrimage and many other similar efforts, today's Serbian Singing Federation boasts the single richest collection of Serbian choral music in the world. Many compositions in the SSF Library cannot be found even in Serbia today!

The Depression years were difficult for everyone, and economic sustenance was everyone's concern. Mr. Lugonja found employment for a brief

period as a publicity consultant for Mr. Mihailo Duchich's Cloverleaf Dairy. In 1938, Mr. Lugonja moved to New York City to work for the Consulate of the Royal Yugoslav Government, where he was employed until Yugoslavia was taken over by the Communists. The contacts he made while being employed by the Royal Yugoslav Government also helped in his efforts to preserve Serbian music on the North American continent.

During the war years there were no festivals and only one convention. At this time, Vlajko put his talents to work and was extremely active as a press correspondent for the Srpska Narodna Odbrana. He coordinated the shipment of thousands of parcels of clothes and food to war refugees.

Mr. Lugonja was also extremely active within the Serbian Orthodox Church and served as a layman on the Diocesan Board. Following World War II as many priests immigrated to the United States, Mr. Lugonja personally assisted in greeting many of them and introduced them to their new parishes.

Vlajko's work in preserving Serbianism and Serbian song on this continent eventuated in his receiving many awards from choirs and organizations throughout the United States and Canada. Two awards, however, that stand foremost among them were the decoration by the pre-war Royal Government of Yugoslavia with the order of St. Sava and the Gramata presented to him by our Serbian Patriarch German.

In 1962, Mr. Lugonja relinquished the position of Executive Secretary voluntarily for purposes of retirement. The convention bestowed upon him the title of Honorary Executive Secretary by acclamation, a title he so justly deserved. But the convention would not and did not accept his full retirement; he was given the continued responsibility for public relations, music research and publishing.

Following a period of illness, Vladimir M. Lugonja, Founder of the Serbian Singing Federation and perhaps the greatest Serbian/American youth leader in the history of Serbs on this continent passed away Tuesday, September 27, 1977 and was buried from the Ravanica Serbian Orthodox Church in Detroit on Saturday, October 1, 1977. He lies buried at the St. Sava Serbian Orthodox Monastery Cemetery in Libertyville, Illinois.

Today the efforts and wisdom of this capable and dedicated man can be credited as being the prime factor in whatever success the Serbian Singing Federation has attained. His influence still is felt in the Serbian Singing Federation, our Serbian Orthodox Church and in other Serbian organizations.