

THIRTY YEARS OF THE “ANICA BITENC TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP” - A TRIBUTE TO DR. IGOR A. S. BITENC

30 GODINA “STIPENDIJE ANICA BITENC” - OMAŽ DR. IGORU A. S. BITENCU

Želimir Mikić*

SUMMARY

Thirty years ago, in 1984, Dr. Igor A. S. Bitenc, M.D., F.R.C.S.(C), a retired orthopaedic surgeon from Canada, who was of Yugoslav descent, and who had always remained attached to his original homeland, founded a travelling fellowship for young orthopaedic surgeons from former Yugoslavia named the “Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship” after his late mother. The first Fellow visited Canada in 1985 and was followed by five Fellows from different areas of Yugoslavia in successive years. Due to the tragic war in Yugoslavia in the 90's, the Fellowship was postponed for several years. It was resumed in 1997, but only for three newly formed states of Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia. Funding of the Fellowship was provided by an endowment from Dr. Bitenc and managed by the Canadian Orthopaedic Association, which hosts one Fellow per year on the rotational basis from Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia. The Fellowship finally proved to be very successful and, owing to the benevolence of Dr. Bitenc, 24 young orthopaedic surgeons from various regions of former Yugoslavia have had the opportunity to visit the best orthopaedic centres in Canada so far. Dr. Bitenc has ensured the Fellowship will continue for many years to come by bequeathing an endowment of \$ 300.000. This unforgettable act of human nobility and patriotic sensibility will be of enormous help in future to many orthopaedic surgeons and their numerous patients in the countries of South Slavs.

Key words: Bitenc Igor; Travelling Fellowship; Canadian Orthopaedic Association.

* Prof. emerit. Dr. Želimir Mikić. Faculty of Medicine, University of Novi Sad.
E-mail: zmikicns@eunet.rs



Photography of Dr. Igor A. S. Bitenc taken 1986 in Novi Sad during the 9th Congress of the Yugoslav Orthopaedic and Traumatologic Association.

In 1984 after many months of negotiations and administrative preparations a kind of a scholarship, named the "Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship" was officially founded. The founder and donator of this Fellowship, aimed at helping young orthopaedic surgeons from the former Yugoslavia to visit the best orthopaedic centres in Canada, was Dr. Igor A. S. Bitenc, a retired orthopaedic surgeon from Canada. The first beneficiary of this Fellowship went to Canada in 1985. So far, 24 young orthopaedic surgeons from the former Yugoslavia and the newly created states of Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia, have visited the best Canadian orthopaedic centres and hospitals and benefited from this very welcome institution created by Dr. Igor Bitenc.

DR. IGOR A. S. BITENC, M.D., F.R.C.S. (C) – LIFE AND WORK

Igor Andrej Stevo Bitenc was born on the 3rd of July 1925 in Ljubljana (Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes at that time, Republic of Slovenia today) [1-4]. His mother Anica was of Croatian and his father of Slovenian origin, and, as he himself used to say, he made his first steps on the Island of Rab on the Croatian coast of the Adriatic Sea [5]. When he was two years old, his family moved to Austria and later to Germany, Switzerland and Belgium. However, he did return to Belgrade in 1935 and stayed until 1940 to attend the secondary school ("The King Alexander Gymnasium" at Dedinje in Belgrade) [1,3-5]. In 1946, he started medical school at the University of Vienna and graduated in 1951. During that time he worked at times as "famulus" at the Vienna Unfallkrankenhaus with Prof. Lorenz Böhler, and at II Medical University Clinic with Prof. Tellingner. From 1951 – 53 he had postgraduate training in Surgery and Trauma at the Unfallkrankenhaus in Bregenz (Austria). In 1953, Dr. Bitenc emigrated to Canada, and in 1953 – 54 he did his rotating Internship at the Sherbrooke General Hospital. From 1954 to 1958, he trained in Surgery and Orthopaedic Surgery at the Royal Victoria Hospital and the Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children in Montreal. He passed his Medical Council Examinations in 1955, the Fellowship examinations for the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1957, and the examinations for specialist of the Province of Quebec College in 1958. In 1958, Dr. I. Bitenc started private practice, joined the attending staff of the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal as Clinical Assistant and became Teaching Fellow of the Department of Surgery at the McGill University in Montreal. In 1961, he became Assistant Surgeon at the Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children. In 1968, he was made Associated Surgeon and Assistant Professor at the McGill University. While at the Royal Victoria Hospital, he served as

Co-Director of the Accident Service. During that period he published several papers [6,7]. Dr. I. Bitenc was a member of the Interurban Orthopaedic Club, the Traffic Injury Research Foundation of Canada, the Austrian Association for Trauma and the Quebec Association of Orthopaedic Surgeons, where he served his term as their president. He was also Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, senior member of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia, senior member of the Canadian Orthopaedic Association and member of the Canadian Medical Association, as well as a member of the Société Internationale de Chirurgie Orthopédique et de Traumatologie (SICOT). Dr Bitenc retired from practice in 1973 and moved to Victoria (British Columbia) at the Pacific coast of Canada. In 1986 Dr I. Bitenc was elected a Honorary Member of the Yugoslav Orthopaedic and Traumatologic Association (JUOT), and in 2002 an Honorary Member of the Slovenian Orthopaedic Association [2-4].

Dr. Igor A.S. Bitenc passed away on January 5th, 2014 in Victoria (B.C.) in Canada [8].

THE "ANICA BITENC TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP"

Dr. Igor A. S. Bitenc, who was born in former Yugoslavia, never forgot his native country, and his original national descent, as he himself wrote: "Through my late mother I was brought up to be very conscious and aware of our Yugoslav origin and ties" [9]. Feeling that way he visited his old homeland many times, and, apart from English and German, he spoke Slovenian, Croatian and Serbian fluently. Since he did not have a family and children of his own, he decided to help his native country by establishing a fellowship for young orthopaedic surgeons from Yugoslavia after death of his mother Mrs. Anica Bitenc (1892 –1980) on September 19th, 1980 [4]. It was in 1982 that Dr. Bitenc officially made an offer to the Canadian Orthopaedic Association (COA) to sponsor an annual travelling fellowship for a young orthopaedic surgeon from Yugoslavia of that time [10,11]. Having worked out the administrative details for the fellowship with the COA, Dr. Bitenc wrote a letter, dated July 7th, 1983, to Dr. Želimir Mikić, who was the President of the Yugoslav Orthopaedic and Traumatologic Association (JUOT) at that time [9], saying: "In memory of my mother I would like to finance by donation and later by bequest a Travelling Fellowship for young Yugoslav orthopaedic surgeons to North America. There are already such Fellowships for Great Britain and some other European countries. These are organized

and funded by the Canadian Orthopaedic Foundation and they are willing to administer my donation and arrange things from here” [9]. This proposition was considered by the Presidency of the JUOT and accepted with great pleasure and gratitude, and then it was presented to the Yugoslav authorities (the Federal Administration for International Cooperation in Belgrade), to be approved in due course. Dr. Igor Bitenc visited Yugoslavia in July 1984 when we met for the first time in Belgrade and discussed all the details of the Fellowship, and agreed that the Fellowship should be named in memory of Dr. Bitenc’s late mother Mrs. Anica Bitenc, and that it should be started in 1985. It was the first time that we had met and I was very much impressed by Dr. Bitenc who presented himself as a polite, sensible and friendly person with pleasant appearance and good manners and intentions, and thus we became friends from the very beginning. After all the preparatory work, the “Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship” was officially founded at the meeting of the Presidency of the JUOT, held in November 17th, 1984 in Novi Sad, and, at the same time it was decided that the first Fellow from Yugoslavia would visit Canada in 1985 [12]. So finally, the “Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship” was born thirty years ago.

At the beginning, the Fellowship was organized on the rotational basis for all Yugoslav republics, meaning that each year the JUOT, according to some basic guidelines, selected a Fellow from another of the Yugoslav republics and informed the COA of their choice. The basic guidelines, as Dr. Bitenc had written them himself, were: “The Fellow should be an orthopaedic surgeon, having finished his training for several years, be outstanding and promising in his field and not be over 40 years of age. Knowledge of the English language is mandatory. The application has to be submitted in the year prior to the planned Canadian visit” [1,8]. Once the Fellow has been chosen, the COA suggests the itinerary and makes all the necessary arrangements. The COA and COA Foundation manage the donation from Dr. I. Bitenc and cover the entire cost of the Fellowship. The fellow visits various orthopaedic centres across Canada during his or her tours, from late May to late June and is invited to attend the COA Annual General Meeting [8].

The first Fellow from Yugoslavia who completed his Canadian itinerary in 1985 was Dr. Ranko Bilić from Zagreb (Croatia), and after him, in 1986, Dr. Goran Ercegan from Novi Sad (Vojvodina - Serbia) who used his fellowship to visit various orthopaedic centres across Canada.

In October 1986, Dr. Igor Bitenc visited Yugoslavia again, this time as an honoured guest at the 9th Congress of the Yugoslav Orthopaedic and Traumatologic Association (JUOT) held in Novi Sad where he was elected an honorary member of our Association (Fig. 1). During his stay in Novi Sad, we discussed various aspects of the Fellowship. Dr. Bitenc was very satisfied that it had finally started successfully, and was very confident for the future. Having returned to Canada he wrote: "I must thank you for the great hospitality and kindness I was privileged to experience at the Congress during meetings and the social events. You have made me feel very much at home there. It was a great honour for me to receive the membership to your Association and I cherish that and the many kind gifts given to me" [1E]. In the following years, the Fellowship continued regularly, and by 1991, four more Fellows from different Yugoslav areas had completed their programs. After that, because of the unfortunate war in Yugoslavia, the Fellowship was indefinitely postponed [10,11].

Connections with Dr. Bitenc were not interrupted during these terrible years and we were permanently in correspondence. In a letter dated January 26th, 1993, he wrote: "It is always with great apprehension, that I feel, when following the news from the various places of the previous Yugoslavia. Even knowing the past history, which people here have no idea about, it is difficult to accept, and far from understanding, the horror, hate and tragedy" [14]. However, Dr. Bitenc did not abandon the idea of the Fellowship. In the same letter, he wrote: "Some day in the future I hope we can revive our Travelling Fellowship. If I should not anymore be around when that could be possible, there will be an Endowment left with the Canadian Orthopaedic Foundation with the purpose to finance the Travelling Fellowship from all areas of the previous Yugoslavia. I hope that day will come" [14]. Owing to Dr. Bitenc's good will and persistence, the Fellowship was resumed and Dr. Domagoj Delimar from Croatia in 1997 and Dr. Drago Dolinar from Slovenia in 1998 made their Canadian tours [10]. However, the Fellowship was resumed only for the two new states formed after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, i.e. for the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Slovenia. Dr. Bitenc has also planned to include Yugoslavia (Serbia) on the roster; however, because of the political situation in Serbia, he postponed it. In a letter dated February 1st, 2000, he wrote: "Yugoslavia will have to wait till there is a democracy. Things have changed since 1985 when we started the fellowship" [15]. After the positive political changes in Serbia, Dr. Bitenc decided to include the Republic of Serbia again in the Fellowship program, and

Dr. Dragan Savić, from Novi Sad (Vojvodina – Serbia) completed his visit to Canada in 2003 [10]. Although Dr. Bitenc wanted to include all areas of the former Yugoslavia in the programme, he finally decided to continue the Fellowship only for Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia because of the great difficulties in communications with other areas. He wrote to me in a letter dated October 21st, 2003: “As I have said only three countries will from now on participate in the “Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship” so each county will have its turn every three years”[16]. Regarding these changes Dr. Bitenc said: “When I started the Travelling Fellowship, it was difficult for Fellows from Yugoslavia to travel and thus learn from colleagues in other countries. Since that has changed in recent years, I believe it is still important to support surgeons from Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia and give them an opportunity to learn from colleagues abroad” [10]. Thanks to help and generosity of Dr. I. Bitenc, 24 young orthopaedic surgeons from the countries of South Slavs have enjoyed this rare and extremely useful opportunity since the beginning of the “Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship”. Dr. Aleksandar Lešić from Belgrade (Serbia) who was the Fellow in 2006 said: “It was the opportunity of a lifetime. I will never forget my visit to Canada and the centers I visited. Updates in the field of medicine, especially surgery, cannot be achieved only through books and journals, but require direct contact with colleagues and their work in other countries. It was extremely important for me to get a chance to see different kinds of treatment and orthopaedic techniques. The tour of Canadian hospitals not only provided me with insight into techniques and treatment used in Canada but I gained much more than I expected due to the kindness of my hosts, as I was also able to experience the culture and life style of Canada” [10].

The “Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship” is now properly organized and ensured. The COA now hosts one fellow per year on the rotational basis from Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia [8]. Dr Igor Bitenc has ensured the Fellowship will continue for many years to come by bequeathing an endowment of \$ 300.000 in his will [10,11]. “ On behalf of the Canadian Orthopaedic Foundation I would like to thank Dr. Bitenc for his generosity” said Dr. Paul Wright, Chair of the Foundation’s Board of Directors in 2007. “This is the largest single gift known to the Foundation, and we are delighted to be part of ensuring the continuation of such an important program” [10,11]. Finally, Dr. Bitenc too was very happy about the functioning of his Fellowship and in his last letter to me, dated January 12th, 2011, he wrote: “You are right that the “Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship” is running smoothly and that the

COA does organize it very efficiently” [17]. Commenting the “Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship” Dr. James P. Waddell, Foundation Chair, said: “On behalf of the Canadian Orthopaedic Foundation, I invite the surgeon community to celebrate the life of Dr. Bitenc. I admire Dr. Bitenc for his generosity and commitment to giving back. We are honoured to carry out his legacy” [18].

CONCLUSION

For me and for most of those who personally knew Dr. Igor Bitenc, he was a remarkable person, a modest, likable man, always polite and amiable, he always spoke in a civil tone and in a friendly way; in one word he was a “true gentleman” as Cynthia Vezina, from the COA Administration said [8]. His donation in the form of the “Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship” has proved, without any doubt, that he was also a generous, warm-hearted man with good intentions; this charitable act of his was really an extraordinary example of the human nobility and patriotic sensibility. His wish to help his young colleagues from his mother country was a splendid idea and could not and should not be forgotten. The “Bitenc Fellowship” was warmly welcomed by the orthopaedic communities of the former Yugoslavia, and has proved to be very successful; owing to this institution a considerable number of the young orthopaedic surgeons from the South Slav countries have had the opportunity to visit the best orthopaedic centres, and to learn from the best orthopaedic surgeons in Canada. It was really a favorable chance they otherwise could only dream about. Dr. Igor Bitenc has gone to eternity but, fortunately, the “Bitenc Fellowship” has been secured and will continue for many years to come and will be of use to many future orthopaedic surgeons in our region, but, and most importantly, the greatest benefits of the “Bitenc Fellowship” will be to numerous orthopaedic patients in his old homeland. That is why Dr. Igor Bitenc will be kept in our remembrance, and the reason we should be grateful to him forever and for everything he had done for us.

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SAŽETAK

Prije 30 godina, točnije u jesen 1984, dr. Igor A.S. Bitenc, umirovljeni ortopedski kirurg iz Kanade jugoslavenskog porijekla, iz svojih osobnih financijskih sredstava osnovao je stipendiju za studijski boravak mladih ortopeda iz tadašnje Jugoslavije u najpoznatijim ortopedskim centrima u Kanadi, koja je, po želji donatora, a u znak sjećanja na njegovu pokojnu majku, nazvana "Stipendija Anica Bitenc" (Anica Bitenc Travelling Fellowship). Prvi stipendista bio je na studijskom boravku u Kanadi 1985, a zatim još 5 mladih ortopeda, iz različitih jugoslavenskih republika, boravili su u Kanadi. Zbog tragičnog rata i raspada Jugoslavije stipendija je u toku više godina bila privremeno obustavljena, a velikim zalaganjem dr. Igora Bitenca obnovljena je 1997, ali samo za tri novoformirane države i to za Hrvatsku, Sloveniju i Srbiju. Financijska sredstva za ovu stipendiju obezbjedio je dr. Igor Bitenc, a cjelokupnu organizaciju sprovodila je Kanadska ortopedska asocijacija (COA), koja je svake godine, naizmjenično, ugostila jednog ortopeda uvijek iz druge države. Organizacija stipendije je u daljem toku bila veoma uspješna, pa su, zahvaljujući velikom dobročinstvu dr. Igora Bitenca, stipendiju do sada koristila 24 mlada ortopeda iz raznih krajeva bivše Jugoslavije, a dr. Igor Bitenc je, donacijom od 300.000 dolara u svom testamentu, osigurao budućnost stipendije za dugi niz godina. Ovaj nezaboravni akt ljudske plemenitosti i domoljublja nesumnjivo će biti od ogromne koristi kako brojnim mladim ortopedima tako i mnoštvu njihovih pacijenata u zemljama Južnih Slavena, zbog čega će dr. Igor Bitenc ostati u našem sjećanju kao veliki prijatelj i dobrotvor kojem dugujemo neizmjernu i trajnu zahvalnost.

Ključne riječi: Igor Bitenc; "Stipendija Anica Bitenc"; Kanadska ortopedska asocijacija