



# Lipik, Croatia—Where Armageddon Began

An Adventist Croatian takes a wrenching journey back to what the war has left of a village he once called home.

*by Josip B. Takac*

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AS WE TRAVEL EAST ALONG THE MAIN CROATIAN motorway, we become aware of some thing unusual: we are almost the only ones using the modern, recently completed highway. My friend, Tihomir Lipohar, AdventPress photographer and cameraman, draws my attention to a petrol station. Although it is broad daylight, a heavy blanket of undisturbed snow makes it clear that it has been hours since a vehicle stopped for service.

Kutina is a small town 70 miles east of the Croatian capital. Although the motorway continues for another 200 miles, this is as far as we can go. Beyond Kutina are the regions of uncertainty, fear, and death. Two Croatian policeman make sure that the occasional traveler does not venture into the unknown. They are friendly, and point to an exit from the

motorway onto an ordinary asphalt road.

Our destination is the Pakrac region. For Tihomir and myself this journey is more than just a journalistic assignment. He was born in Lipik, a small town in the area, as was my wife. I lived in the town for awhile as well. It has had a strong Adventist community. In our wildest dreams we never imagined that this friendly and peaceful region would become known as the Pakrac Battlefield. We would never have imagined that since September of last year, 100 Adventist homes and 15 church buildings would be damaged or destroyed in Croatia and that of the 10 Croatian Adventists killed in the war, six would be members of the Pakrac-Lipik Adventist Church.

The times are dangerous, and no one is permitted into the region without special authorization. A special permit from the authorities in Zagreb, however, lets us pass safely through all the checkpoints and we reach our destination—Lipik. We see here what eyes should never see: carcasses of domestic animals; family dwellings and whole villages burned, some utterly destroyed—ghostly,

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empty places without a living soul.

Kukunjevac, Dobrovac, Lipik, Pakrac . . . It is impossible to find a house anywhere that could be lived in. Empty windows of burned and shattered houses stare at us like the eyes of ghostly creatures. Rain and snow only add to the sense of desolation.

In Lipik, a few missiles have hit the roof of Tihomir's home, doing irreparable damage. A pine tree in his front yard has been split as if by an axe, the work of an exploding grenade. We enter the house cautiously.

Tihomir sorts carefully through the scattered pieces of furniture, kitchen utensils, and books. He is a photographer, and he is looking for pictures of his little girls. I watch him with sympathy, searching for words to break the painful silence, but he speaks first. "What on earth has happened to my wife that she left the house in such a mess?" he asks drily. Then he grows serious. "I feel like leveling all the rest to the ground," he says, "and building it all over again from scratch."

We enter the center of Lipik. It used to be a prosperous little town in central Slavonia, but war has taken its toll. The huge windows of the Lipik greenhouses are shattered. The well-known Lipik horse stables have been destroyed by fire, and we are told that the horses were taken to Bosnia. Rumors tell us that a number of these beautiful creatures were shot and thrown into a large pit somewhere nearby. A beautiful town with aged trees and a lovely park that Austrian emperor Franc Jozef once came to visit, Lipik now looks like a haunted graveyard.

Nothing—not even churches—has been spared. Both the Serbian Orthodox church in Kukunjevac and a Catholic church in Dobrovac show signs of the fierce fighting in the area; but the flattened remains of the deliberately bombed Catholic church in Lipik testify to the anger and cruelty of this war. The Children's Home, the local supermarket, the hotel, and the primary school have all been

bombed on purpose. Lipik is no longer alive.

More than anything I want to know what has happened to a home where, a few years ago, I first met my wife. Ever since then, this house has been a personal friend of mine. But not so today. Although it has not been burned like many of the others, it has still received "mortal wounds." Its roof and windows gone, its walls shat-

tered by machine-gun fire and exploding grenades, the house is strewn with fragments of furniture and personal belongings that have been shattered and destroyed. It is no longer the friend I used to know. It lies like an unwelcome, dead beast.

My attention turns to five other houses in the neighborhood. These belonged to good people, well-to-do families, three of them Croatian and two Serbian. Their children used to play and attend school together. Now their houses have been demolished, two so utterly destroyed by flames that only the outlines of the basements show where they used to stand. It is the work of the heavy grenades, mines, missiles, and napalm bombs of the Yugoslav army, launched from nearby Caglic. The



bombs, at least, were no respecters of nationality.

I have brought plastic tarpaulins with me from Zagreb, and I do my best to cover the windows of my wife's former home against the driving snow. Looking through a broken window, I see the completely burned home of a near relative. She has sought shelter in Czechoslovakia, along with her children. Nothing is left of the home that she and her husband managed to complete only a few months ago. Tihomir and I take picture after picture, knowing that no one will believe us if we only try to describe the scenes.

**I**n dead silence, we move on through the desolated streets of Lipik. "Like a ghost town," I whisper to myself. "The place where Armageddon began," Tihomir murmurs. A number of prosperous Adventist families used to live here—Skorupan, Maravic, Strehovac, Lipohar, Presecan, Margalic, Melic, Dragicevic. Today their homes are all remains of the same tragedy—blasted, bombed, plundered, set ablaze. Six church members are dead. We have no desire to stay longer. Rather, we feel the urge to run from the black walls made even more black in contrast to the falling snow.

Suddenly, gunfire shatters the silence—a machine-gun! Far away at first, it comes nearer, nearer. This is no time to linger. We run to the car and drive hurriedly out of the area. We pass armed young men moving back the way we have come—soldiers from the north-west Croatian districts of Varazdin and Ivanec. They are on their way to take up their fighting positions not far away. They wave goodbye to us. We hear more machine-gun fire, detonations, explosions. Night is falling.

Along the road are the battered hulks of abandoned cars, tractors, and the mangled bodies of cows, goats, and dogs. Pigs and chickens wander aimlessly along the street, looking for food. We stop to take a picture of a blasted house, and the chickens run away in panic; they are afraid of people.

We switch on the car radio to hear the news. Croatian Radio is giving a news update on the recent changes in our banking system. "This is news from another world!" Tihomir says. Graffiti on the once-white facade of a farmhouse catches my eye: "Seventh Vojvodina Brigade!" it says, in Cyrillic writing.

"This too is from another world," I say, "from a distant and unwanted past!" We turn the car and head back to civilization and the future.