

Hajduk lives forever

By Mira Petrović

Get up!, my father yells. There's been an earthquake in Petrinja!

I live in Split, the largest city in Dalmatia, and I have no idea where Petrinja is, or that it is located in central Croatia, as Google suggests, and that people have lost their homes and their animals have died, and that this natural disaster has almost destroyed the city completely. I go to the kitchen, where my father is calling his friends, organizing the journey and collection of food and hygienic supplies, construction materials and shovels, inviting me to join him, to put on my boots and leave the house because that is what Torcida does. Torcida is the beating heart of Split and it is there for those in need wherever they are.

I am fifteen and I enjoy playing football. I hope to play for Hajduk one day, even though Hajduk has been on its last legs for so many years now, due to poor management and lack of finances and vision. Hajduk is a Croatian professional football club based in Split, and one of the biggest clubs in Croatia. It was founded on 13th February 1911, by a couple of students from Split, and named Hajduk by professor Josip Barač. He got the idea when the students entered his office brusquely, in the manner of rebels called 'hajduci', to propose their idea. 'Hajduci' were the outlaws and bandits in the mid Balkans and other parts of the Ottoman Empire, who initiated uprisings and war against the Turks. This is why they eventually became synonymous with fighters for freedom. At the centre of Hajduk football club there were people who supported the unification of Dalmatia and Croatia – Slavonia, which is why the Croatian coat of arms is part of Hajduk's coat of arms as well. The flag of the club is red and blue, and the name Hajduk is written in white in the middle of it. The colour of the jerseys are white, which represents the sail of a ship, and blue, which is the colour of our Adriatic sea. The coat of arms was designed by one of the founders of Hajduk, Vjekoslav Ivanišević. Ana, the oldest sister of the founders Fabijan and Luka Kaliterna, took Vjekoslav's drawing to a monastery, where the nuns sewed by hand twenty to thirty pieces of this Hajduk football club emblem. My father has one of the original pieces and he keeps it framed in the living room. It has been in our family for years.

My father is a proud member of Torcida, which is the name of Hajduk's supporters and fan club founded in 1950. It is the oldest supporters' group in the world, known for its fanaticism and irrevocable faithfulness to the club. My father always repeats the motto of our fans: Only God and Hajduk live forever.

Once we met a tourist in the street, who asked us what Hajduk meant because the city was full of graffiti with its name. My dad took him for a beer to explain what Hajduk represented to him and to our people. He talked about Poljud, our football stadium called 'Poljudska ljepotica' (Poljud Beauty), which is one of the most famous landmarks in Split. Built in 1979 it has a shell-like construction and is positioned next to the sea, nestled in the beautiful scenery. The tourist knew everything about Poljud because he was a fan of the Ultra Music Festival, which attracts people from all over the world every summer. It has always

been a place of joy, but also frustration, as Split has a very temperamental fan base. Even though Torcida is usually associated with violent outbursts, fights and hooliganism, this is far from the truth. My father finished Faculty of Civil Engineering, and all his friends who belong to Torcida have their degrees and lead respectable lives in the community. Of course, there are always those who have become members of the club just because they want to be problematic, light torches and find a way to blow off steam, but whenever there is a problem or someone needs help, there is also Torcida and nobody can deny that. So when supplies from the hospital in Split had to be removed to a different section due to the coronavirus outbreak, Torcida came to help. When there was a fire in Split, Torcida was on the scene before the firefighters. And now when Petrinja needs help, Torcida is there for them as well, no matter the distance. We are entering the van and getting ready for the journey. My dad's friends call me Bernard Vukas because they say I have the same speed in my legs as this legendary Hajduk footballer, whose statue can be seen on Poljud. He was the best player of Hajduk of all times and its first sporting director. His nickname was Bajdo, so my dad's friends always tell me, Come on, Bajdo, Torcida has always been more than just a fan club or group of supporters. We are revolution, passion and frenzy, all in one. Sometimes I wonder if Split has anything else to offer, except the sea and this unassailable belief that Hajduk will live to experience its glory days again. Illusions sometimes keep us going and we all need them.

One of the best memories from my childhood is going to the matches with my father. It is still our family tradition. Whether they win or lose, we are there for our club. My dad usually says that the worst period of his life was when he could not go to the matches. An anecdote that I always like listening to is one which occurred in 1994 when Hajduk was playing against a Portuguese club in Split. My dad and his friends came to the promenade and somebody told them that there were nine Benfica supporters in Split and that they were getting drunk in a bar on the Riva. They saw them sitting there with members of Torcida, listening to songs they did not understand, visibly excited about the match. Everyone was singing 'Hajdučka', by Oliver Dragojević, one of the most beloved and appreciated artists in Dalmatia and in many other parts of the world. Oliver was a huge fan of Hajduk and he would perform free of charge whenever Torcida called him. 'Hajdučka' is the club's anthem and no match can go without it. Benfica fans were trying to learn the lyrics – unsuccessfully, of course. Gullit was their leader, he was tall and had dreadlocks. There was also his girlfriend Rita with him, and a friendly guy named Pedro who spoke English very well. They went sightseeing together around Diocletian's Palace. My father talked about Emperor Diocletian and his epic feasts, when people would lie around and overeat, indulging themselves in huge amounts of food.

Pedro was very talkative at first, but as the streets became narrower and less crowded, he became more introverted, until he eventually stopped and said: Sorry, but I don't have any money. He thought my father and his friends were going to rob him. My father said: Pedro, this is the first European match on Poljud after seven years, man! We were suspended for two years! That was our punishment because of the tear gas which had been thrown on the pitch in 1987 in the match against Marseilles. And then the Croatian War of Independence arose, and UEFA didn't allow any matches to take place in Split and Croatia because of the war... in short, Pedro, you are the first foreign football fan in our town in seven years! Which means life is normal again, eh?

Pedro was relieved, back to his normal, genial, self. He was ready to get beaten up because Torcida had been represented as a group of hooligans in the media, as those who throw the supporters of other teams in the sea, which is why UEFA kicked Hajduk out of Europe. They did not know anything about the war. And my father told him: I love you, Pedro, I really do... I would carry you around the town, if only that could help us have more Wednesdays like this.

When the match was about to start, they met Pedro and his friends again. Pedro said: Nobody let me pay for anything.

Nobody could have predicted that on their way home, their van would swerve off the road close to their home town on the Portugal – Spain border, and that three of them would die. Apparently, only Gullit knew how to drive, and he dozed off a couple of times while driving. Pedro survived. My father and his friends went to watch the return match in Lisbon, and they took the same route in order to pay their respects. Benfica supporters welcomed them the same way Torcida welcomed Pedro and his friends. Torcida was allowed to put flowers on the seats where the deceased used to sit in the stadium. Everybody clapped and cried and Torcida felt as if the stadium was their home.

That is what football is, my dad often says when he tells the story, and that is what Torcida stands for. It is the symbol of the town, its craziness, of people who are willing to believe that Hajduk is more than just a club, and football is more than just a sport. Torcida unites us when it is necessary. That is my opinion as well. Treat people with kindness and believe in what is right. It is not surprising then, that an old lady, who has lost her home in Petrinja, is now wearing a Hajduk cap and saying to the news reporter: I have never seen anything like Torcida. These people are restless. And she is pointing at my dad, who believes that life is just like the game – sometimes you win, sometimes you lose – but you should never stop playing.