Peter Novakovic

One of the first members of the Parish Tuija and I got to know was Peter Novakovic, a stout, round faced Serb with silver hair, golden skin and a full length dark leather overcoat which made him look quite erroneously like a gestapo policeman. He had a loud strident voice and often chanted the morning midweek liturgies after his night shift at Littlemore mental hospital/asylum where he worked for many years serving those who were often out of control and needed to be physically restrained. His quiet jovial appearance belied the suffering he had endured in the war years back home in Banja Luka where many Serbs and Croats took different sides. His father was an Orthodox priest and one day he went into the forest alone presumably to collect food and fuel only to return and find that all his family had been locked in the church which had been burnt to the ground by the Ustashi. At the end of the war he made his way to Oxford, became part of the growing Yugoslav community which had settled here and took a job as mentioned above in a very special area of therapeutic medicine concerned with illnesses of the mind. His faithfulness to the church and Christ’s command to forgive his enemies was taken very seriously and was noted by the Serbian Church hierarchy. The then archbishop wanted to ordain him to the diaconate and presumably to the priesthood but he quietly declined saying that he had not totally forgiven those who had taken the lives of his family.

I used to take Peter home to his hostel at the top of Iffley Road after the liturgy on Sunday with my children in the back of the car who enjoyed his teasing and humour. Despite his warmth and gifts with children he never married even though there must have been many eligible ladies in the Serbian community of which he was a focal part.

I also felt his support very much as we started a family in Witney and served the church, Tuija as a coping mother and her husband as a server to which he was ordained in 1982. In one year a shortage of work meant that I had to go to Germany for 3 months to work for Siemens while Tuija was a month off giving birth and produced our second daughter in my absence. After about 5 weeks at home the only option was to go to Saudi Arabia to work for Shell. Peter asked me about this and I could feel his support and his prayers for us in a difficult period.

One day I came to church and noted a conspicuous weight loss. He said nothing about his cancer but departed this life soon after in his quiet and humble way.

May your memory be eternal, quiet devoted servant of Christ!

As ever,

Fr Seraphim and Tuija

frseraphimvnewton@gmail.com