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Interview of Epi Stephen Bilak

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HARDING COLLEGE OF LIVING MISSIONS

Epi Stephen Bilak from Lausanne, Switzerland interviewed by Don Shackelford

Shackelford: We are glad to have Epi Stephen Bilak from Lausanne, Switzerland present with us on the campus today for our 50th anniversary convocation and also to tell us about the work that he is doing in mission work, particularly the interest behind the Iron Curtain. Stephen, why don't you just give us the background of the development of the work that you are in....the history of how it got started and your involvement in it.

Bilak: Well, it started when I was still at David Lipscomb College. I was praying for an open door to share the gospel of Christ with the people behind the Iron Curtain and I met a man in Nashville, L.D. Lawrence, you remember him and I shared with him my concern with my people behind the Iron Curtain and he said, "Have you ever thought about radio?" I said yes that I had heard that people talk on radio but I don't know anything about radio so he said everything about radio can be learned and you can preach the gospel by means of radio. So while still at David Lipscomb College, I had been writing letters to the various radio stations that were still on a planning board or a drawing board, as we say and then to make a long story short, in 1959 we were on the air from Radio Monte Carlo for the first time November, 1959, then a year later we were on the air from InChung, South Korea and then more recently, about three years ago we got on Radio station in Lisbon, Portugal beaming behind the Iron curtain now four times a week, 15 minute messages.

Shackelford: Tell us a little bit about your personal background, in order that those who will be listening to these tapes and reading this might understand your concern and involvement.

Bilak: Well, I was born in the Ukraine which is today one of the republics in the Soviet Union. When I was born it was under Polish control - that part of the Ukraine and when my dad was born it was Austria and so when I was born, I was born without a country. But of course, I am of Ukrainian origin. I speak Ukrainian, Polish and Russian because of the good neighbors that tried to dominate upon us and had to learn the language and of course...later on I was...during the war...I was taken to Germany and in displaced person's camp I learned about the truth and in 1946 I was sharing it with my own countrymen. The Lord opened many doors for me to go to a Bible school in Paris, France and then to David Lipscomb College until 1959 until we started this broadcast. That is, briefly, my background.

Shackelford: You mentioned that the church in Rochester, Michigan is the sponsoring church that received these funds for this. How did they get involved in the program?

Bilak: Well, it started in 1959. Michigan Christian College was open and Lucian Palmer and Otis Gatewood had asked me to come up and teach in their mission department.. Russian and French language, also a history of missions and at the same time we started the broadcast there. And, at first we were sponsored by the Westside church of Christ in Cleburne, Texas and it was, of course, quite a ways from where we lived and the brethren decided that I ought to look for a congregation closer to where we lived and where we worked. So we finally had the Sylvan Lake church of Christ to sponsor our work but they had difficulties in the church, one of the elders died and another moved and of course the third one had to resign because he couldn't serve as one elder so then we moved to Pontiac church, the church of Christ in Pontiac, Michigan and they couldn't do the work because of many reasons so when the Rochester church where we worshipped all the time had elders...the brethren took the oversight in 1964. They

have been the sponsors ever since. But of course, these broadcasts are supported by Christians in churches all over the nation because Rochester is not able to do it.

Shackelford: You have actually been broadcasting then since what year?

Bilak: Since 1959.

Shackelford: What do you see...our brethren talk about visible results...what visible results have you had, although you nor I either one would agree on the measure.

Bilak: Of course you cannot measure...you cannot ask a farmer when he has gone to sow the seed...tell me what crop you got? Neither can you declare when you sow corn field, some people just declare right away that they have a corn field...you have to wait until corn grows and everyone will know that that is a corn field. The visible result is this...that those who travel behind the Iron Curtain testify that they hear the broadcast and I have been behind the Iron Curtain personally many times. The reason we moved to Europe was to be closer to our target area and I visit behind the Iron Curtain and we have reports that people have been baptized. Churches have been established as a direct result. How many, we have no way of knowing. For instance, if I were to ask, "Could you write to me and tell me how many were baptized?" They will say, "What is your business of knowing that?" "Who do you report to?" Because many of the church activities, baptism included, is not encouraged. In fact, the official church that is recognized in the Ukraine or in Russia - when they baptize somebody they have to register and report to the state so thousands of baptisms are not reported to the state so that the state will not get concerned, get shook up with what is going on. So this remains confidential...how many are baptized or even how many churches are being established.

Shackelford: You speak of the fact that your move to Europe for this purpose. Why the selection of Switzerland?

Bilak: Well, because in my youth, I lived in France and know the French language so in order not to suffer the culture shock again, we chose Lausanne, Switzerland because it is a French speaking part of Switzerland and also for the children's education. Lausanne is sort of like an Athens of different colleges and many schools for foreigners and there are American schools and college and so on. We moved there so that we can have benefit for the children to go to school.

Shackelford: Anything about the neutrality of the country?

Bilak: And of course of the neutrality of the country. People from behind the Iron Curtain can write to us with much more freedom and without censorship. If you were, say, in Germany or in France, the Russians would have censored more letters than those that come to Switzerland. And also, for instance, people from behind the Iron Curtain can come to Switzerland for medical treatment for eye operations, for all kind of medical treatment...they come to Switzerland and they let them in because it is a country that doesn't stick their nose in anybody's soup! So to say.

Shackelford: Tell us just briefly about the mechanics of your work of recording. What are the kind of lessons...how do you go about, for example, of planning a year's lessons? How many lessons do you have in a year that are being...

Bilak: Well, we have three broadcasts on Radio Monte Carlo each week. We have one on Radio Lisbon. On Radio Lisbon is one of the broadcasts that is repeated from Monte Carlo. That is, we make a copy in our studio in Lausanne and send them the identical

program to Lisbon because the broadcast from Monte Carlo are on the air Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings and from Lisbon, it's on Monday. So those we do not reach on those three previous days, we are able to reach on Mondays. My plan of preaching is according to the needs. At first, when we were in Rochester, we presented, for instance, "What Does the Bible Teach on Itself?" "The Inspiration about Man, About Christ," all doctrinal teachings of the Bible. Then, also, we were on the air for a year and a half to read the entire New Testament. We were daily, then, having a program reading just the Scriptures because people requested that we read the Scriptures on the air because it is practically impossible to mail it by mail. So many of them have tape recorders and they tape the entire lessons and then copy it and sermons, for instance, are taped and they carry them with them to their assemblies and listen to them again. Now I am preparing a series to start in the fall, "What Does Jesus Christ Teach?" Just the teachings of Jesus Christ and then on Sundays, of course, we have a big sermon on different subjects. Also, we have questions and answers. We receive many questions on Bible subjects. We answer those on the air. We also read some of the letters on the air because there are some people who listen who are officials in the government and they do not want to be identified. They do not write on their envelope their return address. They just ask us to read a certain paragraph of the letter on the air and that way they know that their letter reached us.

Shackelford: This is very interesting. I think that many times we get stereotyped ideas about how mission work can be the best done and overlook opportunities really of spreading the gospel into areas such as the Ukraine which would be closed to people to go in there and live. Let's talk for just a few minutes about your work in Switzerland. I know that you also work, of course, with the brethren there.

Bilak: Yes, at the present time we don't have a local missionary, as we call it, to work with the local work. So I do also serve the small congregation in Lausanne but we hope and pray and maybe somebody who lives here in the states will come to Lausanne and preach as a lay man or come as a missionary.

Shackelford: How many are meeting in the congregation in Lausanne?

Bilak: We have about 15 or 18 people on Sunday morning to worship.

Shackelford: What kind of preparation, in your mind, does one need in order to go let's say into a country like Switzerland or France to work that they could get here at Harding College. What would be your advice to a young man who said, "I am interested in going into the French speaking world." What would you advise him to study?

Bilak: I would advise him to get all the language that he can. As much as he can so that when he gets there, he won't be completely lost. There is tremendous pressure on somebody who doesn't know the language and tremendous frustration when you get to the field and for a year or two you learn and the church expects you to write some reports about what you have done and you feel you have done nothing when you learn language but that's not true. So I would suggest that not just to our area but wherever somebody goes, that they learn the language. That is a must, I would say.

Shackelford: We offer a major in French here so that's no problem. What else in addition to this?

Bilak: Well, it would be good if they learn something about the culture so that they wouldn't say, "Well, I am going to Switzerland, so I am going to learn the Swiss language," you know. There is no such thing as Swiss language. We have four languages in Switzerland. French, German, Italian and Romanish so here, again, if somebody

wants to have influence in other parts of Switzerland, he maybe, ought to learn all four languages. But one will be enough wherever they go.

Shackelford: What in the way of Biblical studies or other studies do you think would be most helpful to them?

Bilak: Well, I believe that basic Bible training, minor or major, if somebody is going to spend his lifetime in the ministry of the word, he should be equipped the best way possible.

Shackelford: You are an American citizen now aren't you?

Bilak: Yes.

Shackelford: But yet you would certainly have, I think, a perspective to speak from that some of us who were born here would not have. What would you see as some of the excess baggage of Americanism that one would need to discard and not bring along with him to the mission field.

Bilak: I would say, first of all, don't take your furniture with you. There is plenty of junk in the Salvation Army over there. Ha! Uh, really because...try to adapt yourself as much as possible to the people.

Shackelford: I am thinking of, particularly, of the cultural baggage that we sometimes take along that is almost like, you know, waving a flag saying I am an American.

Bilak: Yes, it reminds me of an American who went to one of the European countries-- I will not mention name or country--but he had, you know he came from America well prepared he thought, and he had the idea of having a pocket-size tract, you know. He thought that if you could put the tracts in your shirt pocket you could just hand one to everybody but he didn't realize that in Europe shirts don't have pockets. Ha! Ha! So even your thinking of the methods and so on...the best way I would say is to look and to listen how the grass grows on the other side. And how people act, how people react and so on to....in some places, for instance, highly expensive literature gets a criticism so one has to learn to adopt himself to the new environment, new culture. We have a saying in the Ukraine, "When you get in a crowd of crows, crow like they crow."

Shackelford: Sort of like saying, "When in Rome....."

Bilak: Right, be like the Romans.

Shackelford: All right. Well, I appreciate very much your being here with us today. and recording this information for us. I think it will be very helpful to those who listen to it and perhaps give some a perspective to think about some ministrys that they are not thinking about in the way of radio, etc.

Bilak: We have thousands of open doors. Not just the pulpit.

Shackelford: We need to have eyes to see, that's our problem isn't it? We appreciate your coming and wish God's blessings on you in your work.

Bilak: Thank you. I would like to say a little about my family. Otherwise some girls may think I am an old bachelor and they may get after me so I am married. It will be 20 years in March and we have two girls and two boys. One of the girls is

ready to come to college. She may be coming here to Harding this fall.

Shackelford: We hope so. What are the ages of your other children?

Bilak: Rebecca is 17. She is going to be 17 in May. Stephanie 16, Paul 13 and James is going to be 12.

Shackelford: Of course, I have visited in your home and know your family and appreciate them and appreciate you and the work that you do.

Bilak: Thank you. It is my pleasure to be with you this afternoon.