



# The building of St Elijahs Serbian Orthodox Church in Cooper Pedy

By Fr Milorad Jovic as told to Sue Britt

In 1992 Fr Milorad Jovic was the parish priest at Kilkenny in Adelaide. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of April 1992, he came to Cooper Pedy to bless the water for Easter Holy Week.

He was in Cooper Pedy for three days and during that time he conceived the idea for an underground church, formed a planning committee and bought a hill as the prospective location for the church.

In 1992 the Serb community numbered about 150 people, and in addition there were many other Orthodox people of different nationalities. At that time, people used to travel to Adelaide for baptisms, weddings and confirmation ceremonies, or they sometimes used the small Greek Orthodox Church.

The planning committee for the new church met in the Greek Hall and elected the first President (Mikan Simocovic) and the rest of the office bearers. The Circle of Serbian Sisters Society was established at the same time. Fr Milorad rang the Bishop in Melbourne to tell him that a church in Cooper Pedy was soon to be constructed.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of May 1992, Fr Milorad returned to Cooper Pedy for a picnic. At this time, Svetozar Puhach offered his hill as a site for the new church. When Puhach heard that the church was going to be named after St Elijah the Prophet he decided to donate his hill because his grandfather did the same for the building of the church in former Yugoslavia that was destroyed in the Croatian conflict. Svetozar was continuing a family tradition. St Elijah received a revelation from God in the desert so that was another connection with Cooper Pedy.



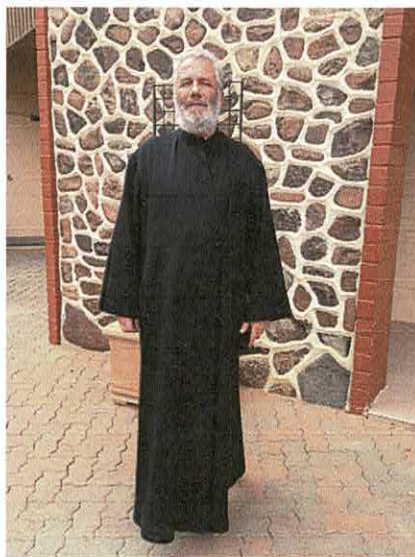
*Serbian Church - Volunteer work force 1992. Photo from the collection of Fr Milorad Jovic*



*The cinquefoil arched roof tunnelled by Ilias Brelas in 1993. Photo: Fr Milorad Jovic collection*



*Stained glass images fit into the stone arches*



*Fr Milorad Jovic*

*Photo: Sue Britt*

Donations were collected at the picnic and in the days that followed for construction of the Parish Hall. Slavko Marjanovic was paid some fuel money as were the other volunteers who used machinery. He tunnelled out the hall in about six weeks. It was tunnelled and included electricity, plumbing, concrete flooring, furnishings, etc in time for the Bishops blessing on St Elijahs Day. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of July the first Liturgy was conducted in the Hall. Later, further tunnelling work was done to create a Sunday School.

The bishops who came from Melbourne and Canberra were stunned by the size, beauty and readiness of the Parish Hall which was used to hold a second Liturgy. Many thought the halls design could be copied for the church.

Fr Milorad, however, visualised a traditional design, based on the martyria, with an arched ceiling. For that a round tunnelling machine was needed. The only one operating in town was owned by Elias Brelas so they had to wait until the first of February 1993 when it became available. Starting at ground level, Brelas made five 30m long drives to create the cinquefoil arch. During the work, Fr Milorad made frequent overnight trips to Cooper Pedy. He held the first Liturgy in the church at ground level under the arched ceiling.

The main body of the ark-shaped rectangular building was tunnelled by Steve Vandenberg using a square machine. A lot of the work was done by hand using pick & shovel, jack picks, explosives and wheelbarrows. The Circle of Sisters supplied the food for the volunteer workers. All work was donated. The women also provided the food sold to the community at the Parish Hall. They even brought their own cutlery and dishes from home. Sales of food and drink paid for the diesel and other materials needed for construction.

By August 1993, the main body of the church was done, in time to celebrate St Elijah Day. No Orthodox church is complete, though, without icons.

The wooden screen, or iconostasis, behind the altar was made by Mile Radosovik a carpenter from Melbourne. The icons on it were by Dragomir Jashovic, a fresco iconographer from Serbia. He sent the images of his art work on slides which were copied in Adelaide on polycarbonate. The pictures on the window and the icon at the end of the entrance tunnel were done the same way.

Norm Aston, an artist from New Zealand, carved the relief image of St Elijah being fed by the crows into the natural wall of the church. Then he used scaffolding to carve Mary with the angels above the iconostasis. Norm worked long hours, mainly at night. While he was working he wore a scarf and hat from Serbia, for inspiration. He also carved icons in the wall by the baptism pool and on the altar.

Dusan Lalic from Adelaide made the cross on the hill.

Meanwhile, an apartment was tunnelled out for the accommodation of a resident priest.

In 1995 the final consecration of St Elijahs Orthodox Church in Cooper Pedy was celebrated.

This account is based on information from an interview with Fr Milorad Jovic and his sons Jovan and Goran on 25/6/16.

**Historical Society Outing**

to the

**Cooper Pedy Cemetery**

2pm, Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> July

Meet at the cemetery gate off Flinders street

Hear about and remember

*Yugo Jack, Merv Richard, Peter Russell,*

*Tibor & Dulcie Szabo, Ricky Brown,*

*Nina Milinkovic and many more*

Appreciate the cultural diversity and individuality in our cemetery