

islam awareness week



Pioneers

Avdo Musovich (1919-2001)

"A battler for the underdog and the working man"

Avdo Musovich grew from humble beginnings in the Balkans to a career sailing the world. He made permanent landfall in New Zealand, where he became known as a battler for the underdog.



Avdo Musovich in the Turkish navy, 1943

Born in simple circumstances in the small rural township of Bielo Polje in Montenegro, on 26 January 1919, Avdo Musovich was descended from a Turkish governor of the territory during the period of Ottoman administration. When he was five years old Musovich witnessed the infamous massacre of the Muslim men of the village of Sahovici and three years later he ran away from home to the port of Dubrovnik in Dalmatia. In 1934 Musovich stowed away on a ship and travelled the world.

Musovich joined the Turkish navy just before World War Two until transferring to the Turkish merchant navy in 1944. When his ship visited Yugoslavia in 1945, the Communist Yugoslav secret police imprisoned him in Montenegro for six months. He was released but not permitted to leave the country. Musovich's seaman's skills found him a job in the Yugoslav merchant navy in 1947

and for six years he worked on coastal ships. However in 1952, on a working trip to Turkey, Musovich defected. Avdo Musovich ultimately travelled to Auckland and in 1953 he jumped ship again, claiming political asylum.

Fact:

In 1969 Avdo Musovich's son Miralem made history when he became the first known Muslim to join the New Zealand military after enlisting as an engineer cadet with the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) at Woodbourne, near Blenheim.

Musovich gained residency in due course, but his wife Sadika, a young woman from Herzegovina whom he had married in 1950, and their son Miralem could not leave Yugoslavia to join him until 1962. Two further sons, Ramzi and Suad, were born to Avdo and Sadika in New Zealand and in 1965 the family became New Zealand citizens together. With the arrival of his family Musovich retired largely from sea life and took up work at a glassworks factory.



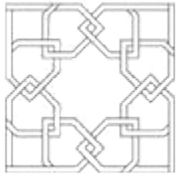
The New Zealand Muslim Association (NZMA), formed in Auckland in 1951, held the "First Muslim Congress" in central Auckland in January 1956 to accelerate plans to build the country's first masjid, or Muslim house of worship. Avdo Musovich became a member of the Executive Committee formed at the Congress to achieve



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this goal, which was achieved with the opening of the Ponsonby Masjid in 1980. Musovich was part of the NZMA Executive Committee from 1956 to 1981, the longest serving member of a New Zealand Muslim organisation.

Fact:

The 1996 census revealed that there were 210 "South Slav" Muslims living in New Zealand, possibly the largest single identifiable component of the 1176 European Muslims identified thus (the remainder presumably being Albanians, Turks and converts).

After retiring from active Muslim community work Avdo Musovich dedicated much of the following decade to family life. When conflict erupted in Bosnia in 1991, Musovich was the senior-most Yugoslav Muslim in New Zealand. He spearheaded New Zealand efforts towards fundraising and providing relief for his brethren "back home". A Turkish diplomat who visited Avdo Musovich in the 1990s described him as a "living legend". Musovich performed the *Hajj* to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, one of the most significant observances for a Muslim, in June 1992.

In September 1995 Cardinal Vinko Puljic, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Sarajevo (the leading city in Bosnia), visited New Zealand. Avdo Musovich, dressed in national costume, was at the airport with Catholics to greet the "religious leader from a land where war has pitted one religion against another".



Avdo Musovich, 1994

Avdo Musovich died aged 82 on a November Friday in 2001 – the day of weekly congregational prayers – and was buried the following day, the beginning of the fasting month of Ramadhan. Musovich was a selfless man who was entirely committed to carrying out his duty with an unassuming aura of nobility. In his obituary, featured by the New Zealand Herald, he was praised as "a battler for the underdog and the working man." It was also said of him that "he would give the shirt off his back to someone who deserved it."

By Abdullah Drury

Picture Credits:

1. Avdo Musovich in the Turkish navy, 1943 (Musovich family, Auckland)
2. Advertisement for "1st Muslim Congress" in *New Zealand Herald* (23 December, 1955), p16.
3. Avdo Musovich, 1994 (Jones, Lloyd, "Target of Hatred" in *New Zealand Herald* (5 September, 1992), Section Two, p5).



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