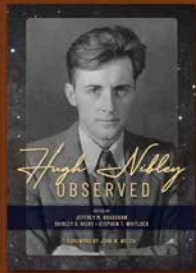


**How Did Hugh Nibley Become a Spiritual Mentor to an Atheist
Basketball Star from Croatia?**

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HOW DID HUGH NIBLEY BECOME A SPIRITUAL MENTOR TO AN ATHEIST BASKETBALL STAR FROM CROATIA?



THINGS THAT
MATTERED MOST
TO HUGH NIBLEY

BYU professor Hugh Nibley was so focused on his unending stream of urgent writing assignments that he never developed an interest in team sports. So how did he become a spiritual mentor to an atheist basketball star from Croatia?



Nibley at the typewriter, 1961¹

Those who are familiar with Hugh Nibley's books naturally think of him as a, well, bookish kind of person. How could anyone who had handwritten, typed, and organized 250,000 3 x 5 note cards, with a linear measure equal to the height of the Kimball Tower building on the BYU campus, have time for anything else?²



Nibley family photo with their oldest six children during a sabbatical in Berkeley in 1960

Especially considering that, in addition, Hugh and Phyllis were raising eight bright and energetic children in their small Provo home.



*Richard H. Cracroft*³

Likewise, though Hugh was, as he put it, “furiously active in the Church,”⁴ he found it a challenge to accept administrative callings, as his stake president Richard H. Cracroft learned while conducting a temple recommend interview:⁵

During the course of the interview, Cracroft asked Nibley if he would accept a calling on the high council:

[Nibley] said, “Oh, that would be fun. Provided that you don’t just sit around and talk about problems and talk about things that could be improved and changed and provided that you [don’t] sit and waste my time that I could be using elsewhere. ... If you don’t do that, then I would be happy to be on the high council.

So Cracroft laughed and said:⁶

“Hugh, you know, maybe we don’t need you on the high council. Because that’s what we do. We sit around and we talk about things like that.” So I signed his recommend and he went on his way.”

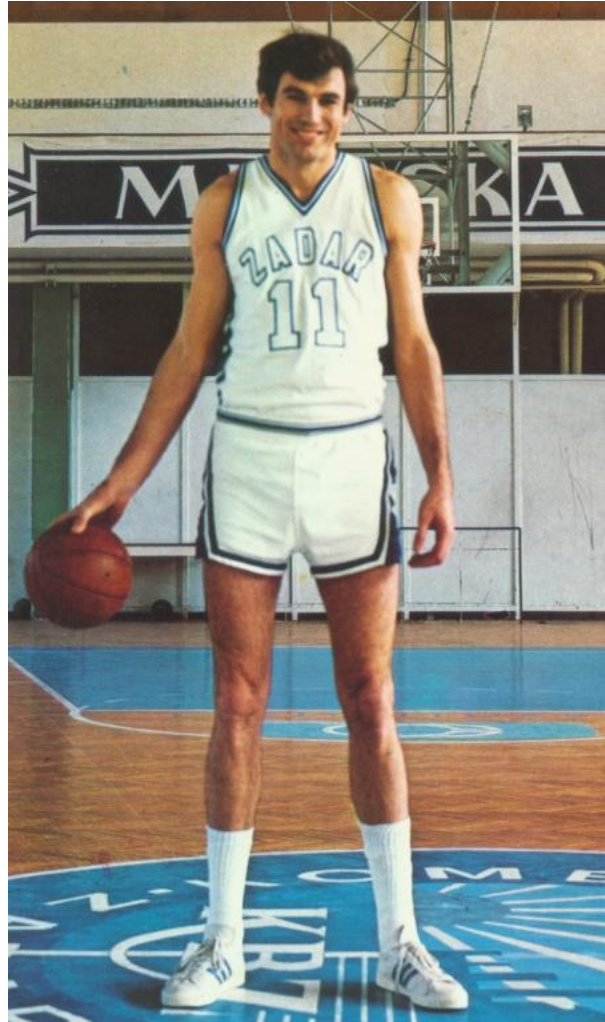


The Nibley home in Provo, Utah

Hugh Nibley was not much for high councils — or for that matter BYU faculty meetings. That much is obvious. But did you know that he was constantly engaged in a quiet, large-scale personal ministry?

Not just answering questions of scores of students each semester, not merely writing back to the hundreds of inquiries from ordinary members who would send him letters, but also to a roommate of his son Alex, a man from Pakistan named Ali, who had just joined the Church.⁷ And to many others, like a young man “who found out he was dying of HIV/AIDS, and ... decided that Hugh Nibley was somebody he needed to know.” According to his daughter Zina, this young man eventually became “one of [her Dad’s] best friends.”⁸

To the dismay of son Alex, the 24-by-7 open door policy of their home to strangers included Monday nights. Alex said that their family home evenings in the home “consisted of a lot of foreign athletes coming over to sit at the feet of Hugh Nibley while he talked about whatever he’d been writing that week.”⁹



Krešimir Ćosić, playing for Yugoslavia¹⁰

One of those “foreign athletes” was Krešimir Ćosić, a tall, lanky, and legendary star on the BYU basketball team from Croatia and an avowed atheist¹¹ who, according to Nibley, had long become used to “the hanky-panky that went on in the outer reaches of the Well-to-do.”¹² According to Dick Harmon:

During his sophomore year at BYU, Ćosić was homesick [and in contrast to the uproarious party atmosphere he was used to, local] postgame celebrations were light fare. After summer, when he led his Yugoslavian national team to a gold medal in the World Championships, he returned to Provo, not quite committed to his new environs.

One night he decided to pack his bags and leave BYU. He told Christina Nibley, a friend who was dating a Croatian tennis player at BYU, he was going to call a cab, get to the airport and fly home.



Hugh, Krešimir, and Nibley's daughter Zina

But a few hours later, spiritual feelings had stirred within Ćosić. He told Christina Nibley he was not going to leave. She told Ćosić about her Dad. Hugh Nibley gives the following account of their first meeting:¹³

[Krešimir] had been welcomed into the charmed circle of the jet set of the time. ... But in considering his true condition, he said, he was greatly distressed — it all seemed so perfectly empty, of course. But what else was there? If that was the sort of thing that everyone wanted, why do we exist at all? Naturally, I quoted the scriptures to him: “Men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25). He did not know the word *joy* —his English was just beginning. “*Rodost*,” I said, trying the Russian word. He responded with a smile of immense satisfaction — Joy was his element, not the dreary and laborious pleasures of sophisticated celebrities, but the spontaneous childlike happiness of sharing.



Hugh and Krešimir walking together on the BYU campus, about 1982¹⁴

Thus began a very unlikely friendship, an eternal friendship. Hugh recounts:¹⁵

One day [Krešimir] came to me and said, “there are a hundred reasons why I should not join the Church, and only one reason why I should — because it is true.” So he asked me to baptize him.



In *Hugh Nibley Observed*, Jane Brady shares this story:¹⁶

On the day that Krešimir was baptized in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, he and Nibley went in he and Nibley went in to get their white clothing. The women behind the counter were in shock, stunned because the day before the supervisor had advised them to complete their inventory with clothing for very tall individuals. When Nibley was asked if he believed that the supervisor had been inspired or if it had just been luck, he replied, “You decide.”



Krešimir Ćosić reads with the Nibley family¹⁷

Nibley further remembered:¹⁸

[Krešimir] did not want to make a public relations gimmick of a sacred ordinance and had a very effective way of keeping it from spreading it abroad: when asked if he had really been baptized, he would give you his usual merry smile and ask with a twinkle, “What do *you* think?”



Ćosić playing for BYU¹⁹

Krešimir continued to share the Gospel wherever he went. Later playing for Yugoslavia in the Olympic Games, he called his BYU coach with a problem. The coach wanted to know what happened:²⁰

“Well,” said Ćosić, “before the Olympics, our team toured Yugoslavia and put on exhibition games and the players were asked to speak to the crowd after the game. Before one of the games I told the crowd I had a movie to show them.”

Everyone assumed it was a basketball movie. It turned out the movie was a classic of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the '60s and '70s entitled, “Man’s Search for Happiness.” [Very appropriate given his love for the joy he found in the Gospel!]

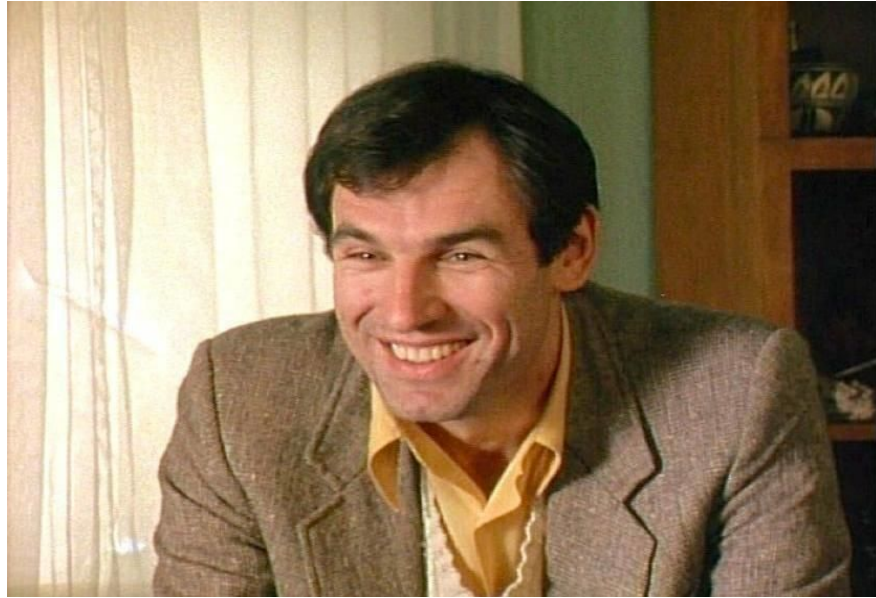
The Communist Party was so upset at Ćosić that upon returning from Munich they took his passport. ...



Family of Ćosić²¹

Turning down more lucrative offers elsewhere, Ćosić later returned to his home country for good. According to Mark Albright:²²

Kresimir laid the foundation of the Church in Yugoslavia at a time when foreign priesthood leaders were not allowed to even minister in the country. As a young priesthood leader, Kresimir organized church branches in Zadar, Zagreb and Belgrade. ... Brother Ćosić also proved himself savvy on the political field when he left coaching in the early 1990s to help Croatia seek an end to the Balkan war by becoming one of the Croatia's top diplomats. ... He was beloved in his native Croatia, a country in former Yugoslavia, as a national hero.



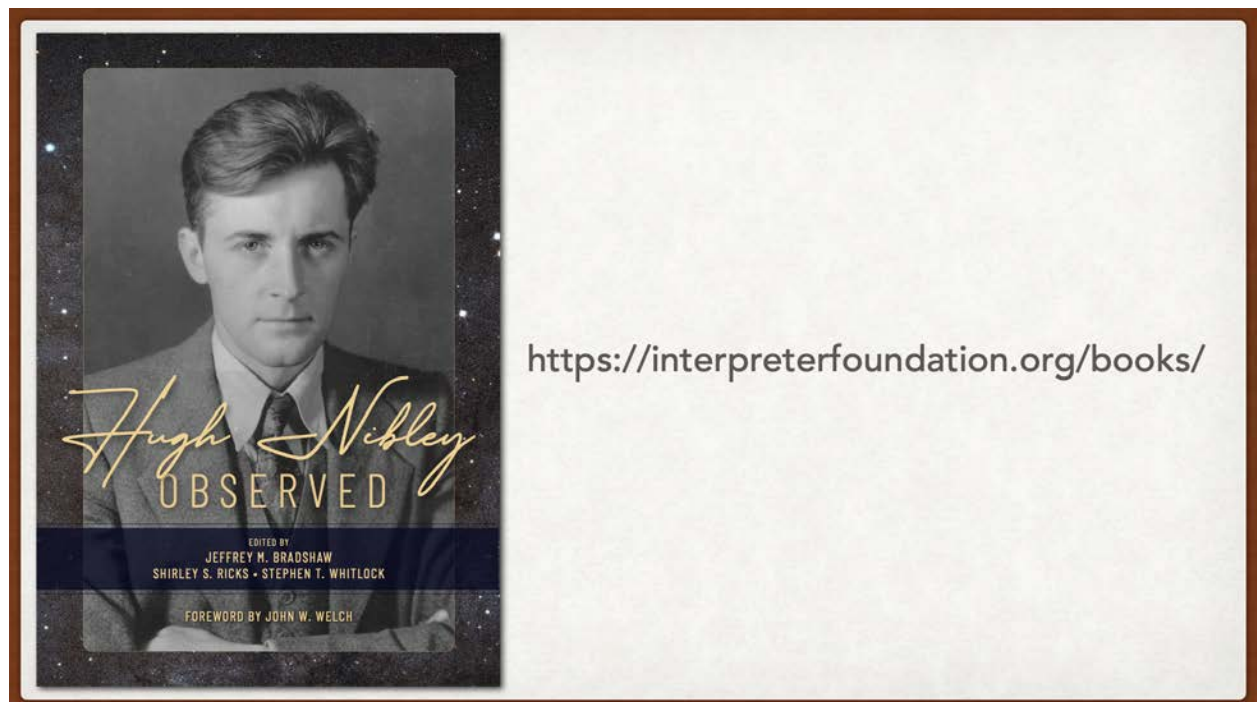
Krešimir Ćosić, about 1982²³

While still in his 40's, Ćosić was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. He passed away not long after a visit that Hugh and Phyllis made to him at a hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Hugh wrote the following letter on that occasion:²⁴

There is a natural ambiguity about administering to the sick — we don't know everything. ... So naturally we pray for what we want — what else? ... But who would be foolish enough to insist that the final decision be his own? Krešimir Ćosić has always been a step beyond ... the normal run of men. His life was ever promising new trials and triumphs, but on a plane not common to mortals; this gives some of us the assurance that all is not over by any means.

His friend,

Hugh Nibley



Hugh Nibley's deep interest in the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ led him to many discoveries of importance to Latter-day Saints. The book "Hugh Nibley Observed" tells the story of the man and his work. For more information, visit interpreterfoundation.org/books/.

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Endnotes

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- 1 Deseret News Archives photo. Published in Sarah Petersen, <https://www.deseret.com/2013/1/31/20513370/an-unlikely-friendship-lds-scholar-hugh-nibley-and-byu-basketball-star-kresimir-cosic-video#hugh-nibley-professor-of-history-and-religion-at-byu-sits-at-his-typewriter-in-this-1961-photo>
- 2 On the estimate of Nibley's note card collection, see Gary P. Gillum in J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *Hugh Nibley Observed*, p. 758.
- 3 <http://www.modernmormonmen.com/2012/10/in-memory-of-richard-cracroft-and-book.html>.
- 4 H. W. Nibley, *Test*, p. 535.
- 5 As reported by Jane Brady in J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *Hugh Nibley Observed*, p. 657.
- 6 J. D. Brady, *Brigham Young University Folklore of Hugh Nibley.*, p. 79.
- 7 See Alex Nibley, Bradshaw, 2021 #12260}, pp. 91–92.
- 8 Zina Nibley Petersen, in J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *Hugh Nibley Observed*, p. 73.
- 9 Alex Nibley in Bradshaw, 2021 #12260}, p. 87.
- 10 M. Albright, *Missionary Moment: Legendary Kresimir*.
- 11 "He began playing basketball at the age of 9, and soon became a sports celebrity by playing on the national team at age 16. Krešimir then led his hometown team to the Yugoslavian national championship and represented his nation at the Mexico City and Munich Olympic Games. The team won a silver medal at Mexico City in the 1968 Olympics" (*ibid.*).
- 12 H. Nibley, *Tribute*, p. 260. According to Dick Harmon (D. Harmon, *Superstar Kresimir Cosic*):
Ćosić came to BYU from a life in a godless environment, a theological wasteland of communist rule in Yugoslavia. He smoked, drank wine at night, and as the star of his national team, was the object of fan worship that stroked his young ego. After Zadar wins there were dancing celebrations, nobody went to work the next day and the hangover of victories lasted days.

13 H. Nibley, *Tribute*, pp. 259–260.

14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raRnN7XHFc> .

15 H. Nibley, *Tribute*, pp. 260–261.

16 Jane Brady in J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *Hugh Nibley Observed*, pp. 678–679.

17 D. Harmon, *Superstar Kresimir Cosic*, courtesy BYU Photo.

18 H. Nibley, *Tribute*, p. 261.

19 D. Harmon, *Superstar Kresimir Cosic*, courtesy BYU Photo.

20 *Ibid.*.

21 M. Albright, *Missionary Moment: Legendary Kresimir*.

22 *Ibid.*.

23 Photo by Alex Nibley, published in Sarah Petersen, <https://www.deseret.com/2013/1/31/20513370/an-unlikely-friendship-lds-scholar-hugh-nibley-and-byu-basketball-star-kresimir-cosic-video#kresimir-cosic-during-an-interview-with-alex-nibley>

24 H. Nibley, *Tribute*, pp. 261–262.