



DENIS  
POLJAK, Ph.D.

DAVOR  
POLJAK, M.B.A.

# CHOOSING HOME



Centenary  
COLLEGE OF LOUISIANA

*“We really are*  
**SHREVEPORTERS.”**



It’s a short walk from Denis and Davor Poljak’s Texas Street office to one of their favorite downtown lunch spots, but not a quick one. From the lobby of the Regions Bank Tower to the dining room at the Shreveport Club, the outgoing brothers and business partners stop to greet friends and clients, inquiring about their family members, recent vacations, and weekend plans. The Poljaks navigate this environment with the ease and confidence of people deeply knowledgeable about and invested in a community. As Davor puts it, “We really are Shreveporters.”

According to a textbook definition, though, the Poljaks aren’t “from here.” Denis and Davor were born, two years apart, in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a country made up of six distinct republics which are today independent states: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. The Poljaks grew up in the industrial center of Zenica about 40 miles north of Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina and site of the 1984 Winter Olympic Games. Their father, Tommy, worked hard to become a vice chairman of a large state mining and metallurgical company called RMK Zenica, a position that ensured a comfortable life for the Poljak family. Their mother, Ula, was a pediatric nurse and social worker. Tommy was also a champion tennis player - as President of the Yugoslav Tennis Association, he led two outstanding Yugoslav Davis Cup teams in the early 1980s. He passed on a love of the game to his sons, and the brothers fondly remember traveling all over Yugoslavia and other parts of Europe to compete in tennis tournaments. “We loved it,” recalls Denis. “It was an amazing life.”



Tennis ultimately brought the Poljaks to the United States and to Centenary. Former Centenary coach Jimmy Harrison first spotted Denis playing in tournaments in Texas in 1990, and in the fall of 1991 the elder Poljak enrolled at the College and joined the Gents tennis team. Davor followed in the spring of 1992. They were attracted by the opportunity to play the game they loved but even more by the chance to study business and economics at an American school with a stellar academic reputation. Inspired by their father's successful career back in Bosnia, the brothers had a plan. "We were just going to come here and learn English, study economics, graduate from Centenary College, and go back and jump into the career path that we had envisioned," explains Davor.

The Poljaks eagerly tackled these challenges, persevering through rigorous courses in a foreign language and balancing the responsibilities of college athletics against the lure of college social life. Both brothers had completed mandatory military service after high school, and this experience left them disciplined and focused. They proceeded, however, in the shadow of the violent collapse of their country, one of the most tragic and shocking events of the late 20th century. By the time the Poljaks graduated from Centenary, the "amazing" life they had enjoyed as Yugoslavs had been besieged—literally and figuratively—by fear and ethnic hatred stoked by cynical, power-hungry authoritarian leaders. The country and the way of life they knew and loved

was destroyed. There was nothing to go back to. Even more devastating was the uncertainty and anxiety that plagued Denis and Davor as they waited—sometimes for months on end—for some word from their parents back in Bosnia. In April of 1992, just a few months after Davor joined Denis as a student at Centenary, the Yugoslav People's Army and its supporting paramilitary groups began a nearly four-year siege of Sarajevo and several surrounding areas, including Zenica—the longest siege of a capital city in the history of modern warfare. Nearly 14,000 people were killed during the siege, and many more—like the Poljaks' parents—were trapped with little food, fuel, or communication, surrounded by heavy artillery, tanks, and snipers. By the time the conflict ended in 1995, more than 100,000 people had been killed across Bosnia.

Forced to watch this grim spectacle from afar, the brothers largely kept their fears about their parents and their emotions to themselves. Davor remembers that when he and Denis were alone, grappling with the enormity of what was happening to their family and the realization that they might never see their parents again, they tried to fix their eyes on a larger purpose. "We said, 'Our parents would love



for us to be good human beings, to finish our education, to do as much as we can with tennis, and to push forward and one day to give it back. That's what we were doing—it was for them, and for us. We chose to move forward.” A welcome bright spot for the brothers came in July 1993, when the Poljaks were chosen to represent a now independent Bosnia-Herzegovina at the “Universiade,” or World University Games, in Buffalo, New York. They recall it as a thrilling but also an incredibly poignant experience, because even as they basked in the cheers of the large crowd when they carried the Bosnian flag at the opening ceremonies, a terrible war still paralyzed their homeland and they had no idea, in that moment, whether their parents were alive.

Regions Tower to the Shreveport Club. Soon they are leaning forward in their chairs and relating an animated litany honoring the Centenary faculty and staff who embraced them when they needed it the most: “At the beginning there were families who were so important: the Nikolić family, the Nossers, Coach Jimmy Harrison and his wife Jeannine, the Adams family, the Paines, and the Castens. Then Miles Hitchcock, Barbara Davis, Helen Sikes, Harold Christensen, David Hoaas, Barrie Richardson, Cecil Ramey, Don Wilcox, Rosemary Seidler, and Kathy Fell (her son, Joseph, now works with us!). Of course, Jeff Hendricks was there! And Gary and Golda Young in the Registrar's Office—we would make a special trip and give them hugs! The athletic director Walt

Stephenson, David Bedard, and Vicki LeFevers—they were always there. So many wonderful people, who just took extra time with us.”

Many Centenary graduates cherish the contributions of their own set of mentors, advisers, cheerleaders, and compatriots during their formative college years, but the Poljaks' extraordinary circumstances and experiences have given them an unusually clear understanding of the true value of relationships and connections, of friends and family. They felt these concepts most acutely on

April 12, 1994, when Denis heard three almost unbelievable words in a 3:00 a.m. phone call from his father: “We are alive.” Afraid that he was dreaming, he didn't even tell Davor. But the next day his father called again, and both brothers were able to hear the news that their parents had been able to leave Zenica and had arrived safely in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. By September of 1995, with crucial assistance from the late Virginia Shehee, the elder Poljaks were in Shreveport. They saw Davor walk across the Centenary graduation stage in May of 1996, the two most important members of a now substantial cheering section in the family's new home.



Though they remained, as Denis puts it, “proud and private” about their situation, their friends, professors, and other Centenary community members were certainly aware of and concerned about the turmoil in the Poljaks' home country and the inevitable toll that it must be taking on them. From the moment they arrived in Shreveport, Denis and Davor were welcomed into countless homes and families and invited to share Sunday lunches, tennis matches, and school breaks. “You hear often about Southern hospitality,” says Denis. “We lived it.” Asking the Poljaks about the people who figured prominently in their early days in Shreveport and at Centenary unleashes a memory-lane version of the walk from the

*The Poljaks like to tell people that they are*

## **“A WALKING BILLBOARD FOR CENTENARY”**

From that point on, the Poljak family sunk new roots in Shreveport. Denis had graduated from Centenary in May 1994 and started working in public accounting, which led into a career in wealth management. Davor joined him several years later, and in 2009 the pair moved to Morgan Stanley and teamed up with John W. King to form the King Poljak Group, a financial services firm specializing in wealth management for families. In 2021, the brothers became principals in their own wealth management firm when they created Poljak Group Wealth Management at Steward Partners, specializing in wealth management, retirement planning, legacy building, estate and tax planning, portfolio creation and maintenance, and risk management.

Their father, Tommy, worked with his sons in the wealth management arena and also shared his tennis knowledge as an instructor and coach at several tennis clubs in the area, including a stint as head tennis coach at Louisiana Tech University. Their mother, Ula, enjoyed being able to focus on family, especially her four grandchildren, and enjoyed many happy years in Shreveport before she passed away in November 2019.

The Poljaks like to tell people that they are “a walking billboard for Centenary,” and one hallmark of the extent to which they have embraced the skills and habits of a liberal arts education is their continual pursuit of professional certifications and higher degrees, making their firm one of the most qualified and experienced in the Shreveport-Bossier area. “We’re truly life-long learners—it’s all Centenary’s fault!” they exclaim. Both brothers worked for 10 months to receive a special certificate in portfolio management from Columbia University in 2016, and it was especially significant for Denis to complete his Ph.D. in economics at the University of Sarajevo in 2011. He had briefly attended the university, one of the most respected in central Europe, before coming to the United States and to Centenary. “My goal was always to go the extra step, but then I got the idea of completing my educational cycle where I started,” says Denis.

In addition to their drive for professional excellence, the Poljaks believe that their success in the financial services industry flows directly from their personal—and sometimes painful—knowledge about family, relationships, and the uncertainty of the future. As Denis explains, “Yugoslavia was one of those idealistic societies—a beautiful country loved by everyone who lived there. What we experienced was a good standard of living, but as it turns out it was a temporary utopia. We witnessed the whole country collapse, including the financial system.”





**“All of a sudden, it didn’t matter who you were—everything was just gone. Today, we help families prudently manage and diversify their wealth so that they and their generations are protected.” The brothers realize that, from the outside, their work in wealth management and financial planning can appear to be “all about the money.” Davor reiterates that things are different for them: “It’s about people, it’s about relationships, it’s about trust. It’s about giving everything to make sure that everyone’s taken care of, and it means a lot to us. It really does have a lot to do with everything we experienced.”**

The Poljak formula works well—so well, in fact, that the brothers have received several offers to move their business to larger and more lucrative markets such as Dallas, Houston, and—about 10 years ago—New York City. “In 2007, we all sat down and talked about it as a family,” recalls Denis. “You can’t just plug it into an economic formula. How do you measure what’s important in your life? Being together, being here, being close to one another. Because we lost that once—that was an intangible value

that you couldn’t put a price on.” They turned down the New York offer and decided not to entertain any others—they were here to stay. The Poljaks have invested in their adopted home not only by basing their business in Shreveport but also by actively supporting institutions and organizations that enrich the community as a whole, including their alma mater. “The idea that you have a school of the caliber of Centenary here is so important to this region,” says Denis. “So is the medical school. And then the arts scene—the symphony, opera, public radio, the arts council, the local paper. These are the things that make this community what it is.” What the Poljaks hope to cultivate and contribute to is a place where, as Denis puts it, “a high tide lifts all boats”—a city with good jobs and opportunities for everyone, a community where young people—including Centenary graduates like themselves—want to stay and build a future.

The Poljaks conduct their business and their lives with profound gratitude for the chance to reconstitute a future after the one they had envisioned was ripped away. They viscerally understand the value of gifts that others take for granted, like watching their children grow up with their grandparents. Or being an American, another favorite topic for

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**“AMERICANS BY CHOICE”**

the brothers. “People who know us will tell us, ‘You are more patriotic than we are!’” says Denis. “It goes to back to being grateful, and we have a whole different level of appreciation for what is here. It’s the rule of law, the freedom of speech—you know, we didn’t grow up with full freedom of speech. It just wasn’t there. But those things are important.” Davor continues, “We often have this conversation, ‘What makes America great?’ What makes America great is that people who come here from other parts of the world are here because they want to be here. No matter where they come from, they are here because they want to be a part of this American dream.”

The Poljaks proudly count themselves among these “Americans by choice”—Denis, Davor, and their parents all became citizens. Before they chose America, though, they chose Centenary. “We could have gone to different schools, bigger schools—but we chose this place, and it was the right choice,” says Denis. Now, more than 30 years after he first arrived to study economics and play NCAA Division I tennis at a small liberal arts college in Shreveport, Louisiana, Denis speaks for all the Poljaks as he explains, “We think a lot of things happen for a reason. We’re grateful to this community, and now we feel like we’re from here, because it embraced us during a challenging time.”





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