



Overcoming War Legacies in Former Yugoslavia

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◆ The fruit of forgiveness is peace and love and the fruit of revenge is unrest and hatred. ◆

◆ Various folk proverbs are placed throughout this newsletter. These proverbs come from all over Southeast Europe. Many of them appear in Serbian, Croat, Bošnjak, or Kosovar Albanian traditions with slight variations. When quoted, these folk proverbs usually begin, "The people say . . ." Many thanks to Amela Puljek-Shank, MCC co-regional representative for Southeast Europe based in Sarajevo, for providing these folk proverbs and for compiling this issue of the Peace Office Newsletter. ◆

On a Peace Way

by Cvijeta Novaković

Whenever I think about the beginning of my peace work, which is closely connected with the Centre for Culture of Peace and Nonviolence, I return to the hardest time in my life. This was during the war, which I experienced as a refugee and mother with two kids, living in a small village on the Adriatic coast. We were without any word from Bosnia or from family and friends—in the hardest isolation, which was the worst for us.

It was an atmosphere of helplessness, which both refugees and local residents lived under, perceiving the war as something we have to accept and try to survive, respecting the rules that some invisible person put upon us.

One day, I just recognized that I do not want to accept this—that I, and all the ordinary people, have to do what is in our power to help stop the war, to prevent it, and to ease its victims' suffering. Even though I didn't yet know what to do and how I could do that, this feeling was a real call, which I had to find an answer to.

This decision was my first step on the way of peace—in the work that I have done from early 1995, work that I love, even though it is very hard, demanding, and often invisible work.

Looking for Results

The question of the results of work is always very hard for me: how do you measure the result of one cross-border meeting in which 35 women made friendships that they will

keep in their hearts forever? How do you know the result of a training for teachers, in which people from different sides, even from the same village, were talking about the hardest experiences they had, about war prisons, about displacement from their homes because of their name, nation, or religion?

These people broke their enmity by the end of the first week and made friendships in the second one. How precious are friendships made between Marija and Amira, two girls from different parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina (B-H); Tanja and Merima, girls from Serbia and B-H; and Marko and Fisnik, boys from two parts of the same village in Kosovo.

How do you measure the value of a workshop in which for the first time after the war, young representatives from different political parties from the region met, talked about tolerance and nonviolence, and recognized its value and necessity? How do you know how much participants from numerous gatherings, trainings, and workshops took from them and brought to their homes, schools, organizations, and communities, and held in the bottom of their hearts?

Maybe some of their stories, about a friendly meeting, an experience from the other side, a touching word from an unknown person, some principles of conflict transformation, skills in nonviolent communication, some empathy, some awareness about the needs and suffering of others, kept in their minds and hearts, could change a lot of things, in their and our future. I believe they could! They bring with them seeds of peace, which we all encourage to sprout and grow.

The Centre for Culture of Peace and Nonviolence is a small nongovernmental organization that was founded in 1997 at the initiative of a few enthusiasts. It was intended to be an answer to the great need for peace work in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the region, which had just survived a few long years of intense war.

The main aim of the organization is to support the peace process on a local, regional, and global level by developing a culture of peace and nonviolence, through education and training, cross-border cooperation, work with youth, women, teachers, and other specific groups, and linking with international peace activities.

In seven years of work, CCPN has completed many projects on a local, regional, and international level, and made valuable partnerships with different organizations, institutions, and networks. In the early days we were supported by Quaker Peace and Service. The World Council of Churches and Mennonite Central Committee have also been long-term CCPN donors.

We had a successful cooperation with Bridges for Education, from the United States, which organized youth camps to which CCPN sent mixed groups from Bosnia-Herzegovina for three years.

—Cvijeta Novaković

◆ My brother is mine, regardless of his faith sign. ◆

A Hopeful Example

Sometimes these seeds grow up faster and become visible to us and bear fruit for others. I am so happy when I recognize it. It happened the first time in a training in conflict resolution for youth in Budapest, with participants from Muslim and Christian areas of B-H and from Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia, just when the war in Kosovo was starting. There were a few boys from Kosovo, two of whom were fairly militant in the beginning, bringing high tension in such a mixed group at that time.

A few days into the two-week training, the boys from Kosovo got messages from their parents to return home within three days, because the war was starting and they were obligated to participate. Only one boy was supported by his family to stay and escape to England, but the request from the other families was to respect the obligation and go into the army.

It was a hard time for all of us, and we talked together, even until morning. It was hardest for those who had to deal with such a hard dilemma. In those few days, faced with real danger and under pressure, these

boys passed through a fast, painful process of change, from having a military orientation to having a peaceful affiliation. At the end of the third day, two of them left the group with tears and went to Kosovo, respecting the requests from their families, but we all knew that they had changed their positions.

Many times in the next months I worried about these young boys who were forced into a war that, I was sure, was not their choice. Then, I got information that one of them, the one who was the most militant at the beginning of the training, escaped from Kosovo and the war!

It was such wonderful news, which gave me a visible result of the peace work in which I am involved. It gave me hope that more and more similar changes will one day really make the peace that we need all over the world.

Cvijeta Novaković is a mother of two and a computer programmer, nonviolence trainer, Reiki (hands-on healing) master teacher, and poetess. She is a leader of the Centre for Culture of Peace and Nonviolence in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Seeking Hope in Serbia

by Ed Wiebe

News from the Former Yugoslavia (FY) is scant in the West these days. That, however, does not mean that the effects of the conflicts of the 1990s are not still being felt in the various states that used to comprise Yugoslavia.

Little has been settled politically. In most of the states the same holds true for issues relating to the economy, the development of civil society, parliamentary and judicial reforms, human rights, and the rule of law. The states (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia-Montenegro, Slovenia) each have their own pressing issues to resolve, ranging from the less volatile such as potential European Union (EU) membership for Slovenia and Croatia, to the more troubling problems of corruption and smuggling, the right of return of refugees to their former homes, and the continuing hunt for major war criminals.

Generally the potential for conflict in the southeastern part of the Balkans (Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Albania) is still all too present. The final status of Kosovo (a former autonomous province of Serbia), now under United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) control, is yet to be determined and provocations on both sides of the Serbia-Kosovo border have recently intensified.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina the presence of U.N.-mandated Stabilization Force (SFOR) troops is still deemed necessary. Although Yugoslavia's economy was more diverse than those states which were part of the East Bloc, trading with both East and West during the height of its economic success, the current states of the FY are struggling greatly to revitalize and restructure their economies to be in line with Western and other free market economies.



Slobodan Milošević's War Crimes Trial

The war crimes trial of former President of Serbia Slobodan Milošević at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague, Netherlands, is continuing in the fall of 2003 after a summer break, and will possibly extend into 2004. Milošević routinely complains of fatigue and ill health; some weeks the trial is postponed for days on end because of that. He continues to represent himself and recently asked for two years to complete his defense. The court ruled that he now has three months to wrap it up. Little speculation is offered as to which side is winning, but so far the prosecution does not seem to have uncovered the "smoking gun" they were hoping for. The trial continues to get daily live television coverage here in Belgrade. Meanwhile the government of the Republic of Serbia is set to bring murder charges against him, accusing Milošević of arranging the assassination of Serbian President Ivan Stambolić on August 25, 2000, in Vojvodina. (Reports on the Milošević trial are available at www.cij.org.)

—Ed Wiebe

Since I have lived and worked only in the former capital of FY, Belgrade, most of my comments and examples will be from here. For the most part, however, they are indicative of the issues and challenges facing the states of the FY. Most observers would agree, though, that Croatia and Slovenia are further along the path to reforms than the others, and that Macedonia, which became independent earlier, is also in its own category.

Economic Challenges

One practical local example that highlights the frustrating state of economic reform is the attempt of an evangelical church-run nongovernmental organization, Bread of Life (BoL), to work at economic develop-

ment projects. BoL, which MCC has supported for over 10 years, now faces the dilemma of vastly decreased international support, with no way to create local income or help small business, due to state regulations and debilitating tax structures. Although it is a registered charity, current laws are such that BoL faces taxes and rules that make it impossible to pay adequate salaries for its own staff, or for entrepreneurs it assists to sell their handicrafts legally without incurring huge taxes or being cited for illegal business practices. Laws to rectify this situation were being drafted in 2003 but they died as Parliament dissolved when it faced defeat over a non-confidence motion. After new elections on December 28, 2003, it is not clear if or when this legislation is going to come back, or in what form.

◆ The house of an Albanian belongs to God and the guest. ◆

The Status of Kosovo/Kosova

The name of this disputed territory is commonly written in English as Kosovo, following the Serbian term. However, Kosovar Albanians use the term Kosova. The territory remains under United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) control with the Kosovo Force (KFOR, the NATO-led group established by the United Nations) present as the international security force. Talks about the future status of Kosovo were scheduled to start in fall of 2003, including dialogue between Belgrade (Serbia) and Priština (Kosovo). In Serbia most politicians talk about Kosovo as an important part of Serbia's past and future, because they want to be in line with the large majority of the local electorate, which holds that view. They might settle for a partition of Kosovo, but anything less would be considered too big a loss. In Priština the commonly held view among Kosovar Albanians and almost all political parties is that independence for Kosova is the only acceptable option.

In Serbian political discussions, the final status of Kosovo is frequently compared to the situation of Republika Srpska (the Serbian entity created by the Dayton Accords in Bosnia-Herzegovina), but in reality the two issues seem very different. The main point of such views usually seems to involve trying to get agreement that the current borders of the former Yugoslavia need to be redefined more in Serbia's favor.

In this issue, articles that have been written by authors from Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia use Kosovo. Articles that have been written by Kosovar Albanian authors use Kosova.

—Ed Wiebe and
Amela Puljek-Shank

Both the Pentecostal and Baptist churches (founders of BoL) are among the majority of Protestant churches that are not protected under minority rights legislation, and continue to be routinely cited in the media as “sects,” distinguishing them from the traditionally recognized Orthodox and Catholic churches. They have little clout in terms of lobbying for more equitable and just rules concerning business taxes or rules governing charities.

The impact of reorganizing all aspects of the old economic structure is extremely harsh in Serbia. It includes privatizing the vast, outdated state-owned companies, which results in massive layoffs, and a complete overhaul of the financial structure including banking and taxation. All of this is taking place in a country that is still reeling from the effects of the decades under Tito's Communist regime, the civil strife that erupted in the wake of its collapse, years of U.N. sanctions, and a continuing battle with rampant corruption.

The region never had a chance to work at restructuring society in the way that the Czech Republic or Hungary did, due to political vacuums that allowed the quick rise of nationalism and the resulting conflicts. Thereafter, unstable governments operating under weak constitutions have too often been the norm. With the compounded problems facing states after the conflicts, simply finding consensus on a form of governance has been so difficult that economic reorganization has been largely put off (as have other major aspects such as health care and education).

No one party can form a majority government in Serbia and the presidency remains vacant after three failed elections. Privatization of former state-run businesses has suffered from problems that also dogged the former Soviet Union, namely corruption and lack of transparent processes and the fact that the “products” for sale (decaying and obsolete factories) are not attractive.

While the world has shifted toward globalization, most of the FY has gone from being a manufacturer and exporter to an importer of products. Even if the years of conflict had not occurred, it would have been difficult to maintain an export position since the products from the old economy would probably not have found markets in the West.

Now FY faces the daunting prospect of competing on the global market and completely reworking its industrial base, while Asia and other competitors have gone much further

along that road. There is also disagreement here whether it is even good to pursue such global aims. Some argue that rebuilding the economy for local or regional needs would be best, ignoring the Western-inspired trends of globalization.

In the case of Serbia, a decade under Western sanctions has added to the economic woes. Here the official unemployment rate is now 30 percent, but the generally accepted “real” figure is closer to 60 percent, since official numbers do not include refugees or displaced people who still number over half a million here. They also do not include workers who are essentially jobless (and without pay), but still listed as employed by factories that are no longer in operation.

Since no taxation system has been put in place to cover the costs of social services, health care, and education, these essential aspects of society suffer greatly and morale among professionals in these areas is at rock bottom. In the area of housing, in Belgrade it is estimated that 70 percent of housing units, that is, apartments or private dwellings, have irregularities in the lease or title. This leaves tenants and even so-called home owners in the tenuous position of not really knowing if they have full rights to their place of residence.

Citizens are also extremely ambivalent concerning the reliability and trustworthiness of their banks. The governor of the National Bank was recently ousted through political wrangling and the successor is dogged by questions from opposition parties who claim she was elected without the necessary quorum in parliament. This amidst people's general skepticism about banks, many of which have been privatized in the past years under very suspect circumstances; clients frequently lost most or all their holdings through corruption or mismanagement, with no recourse.

Economic Well-Being as a Measure of Peace

Given all of the above, any government would be hard pressed to find a way to move quickly and decisively on economic restructuring. The tenuous nature of political power, the threat from corrupt officials to rebel or subvert processes, the threat from those who have become rich from corrupt privatization deals or through criminal activities, growing unemployment, coupled with the cynicism among citizens—that this whole period of reforms and attempts to move toward a Western style of “democ-

racy” is a sham and that the Tito days may in fact have been better—all work together to immobilize the work of any reform-minded government. In Serbia these issues conspired together, at least in part, when Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić was assassinated in March 2003.

Since no one party has been able to form a government in the fractured politics of Serbia, nationalist and other negative forces such as the old guard Communists have fertile ground to work in. Impoverished former bureaucrats, laid-off workers from defunct state-owned factories, displaced people who arrived here over the past 10 years (many of whom have never found a job or permanent housing) are all looking for a reason for their suffering, and for leaders who will offer prescriptions for a way out. This is the same ground that Slobodan Milošević worked so well in the 1990s. His grab for ultimate power in the region inspired and emboldened similar forces elsewhere in FY to stake out their own nationalist claims, partly under the guise of warding off the advance and threat of the Milošević forces. In many of these cases leaders, Milošević included, were also deftly able to mix nationalism with economics to prove to “their” people that some other group was not only taking or retaking lands, but with that also grabbing natural resources, industry, and infrastructure in the process. These two reasons together make for a potent mix when looking for an excuse to go to war.

Could all of this have played out differently if the period of economic reform and revitalization had not been interrupted and overtaken by the outbreak of civil conflict? Civil conflict clearly is one of the factors. It is hard to say if conflict was the pivotal aspect, given that there are so many complex issues in the FY. It seems clear however, that a prolonged period of peace, coupled with processes to enhance and grow peace through reconciliation efforts among the ethnic and religious groups, could have lessened the prospects for any corrupt leader to play the nationalist card. People who continued to cooperate with their neighbors in the post-Tito context and who together had

some hope for a viable economic future might have been less inclined to believe the lies of devious leaders.

Role of the West—Positive or Negative?

The EU is anxious to see a more secure south border zone. They see the membership of FY states as a deterrent to future conflict in southeastern Europe. The United States has been quite disinterested in the economic aspect, but recently has regained some general interest due to its preoccupation with terrorism and security. Economic aid for grassroots projects is drying up but there continues to be some aid to FY states for infrastructure, legislative and judicial reforms, and some emergency aid dollars. Large amounts of dollars continue to be spent to maintain the international presence of both the Kosovo Force (KFOR) and SFOR.

Western interests are generally buying up only the most lucrative enterprises being privatized. Recent examples are Philip Morris and British American buying up the largest tobacco factories in Serbia. Lukoil from Russia is poised to take over Beopetrol, the largest chain of gas stations in Serbia. One purchase that seems more benign is the purchase of a steel plant by American Steel Corporation.

On balance, people feel that the West has interest in the region mostly for the sake of its own security and economic well-being and that intervention over the centuries bears this out. They are ambivalent when the West makes overtures (such as the current EU efforts), seeing such efforts as more self-serving or opportunistic rather than reaching out to neighbors or acting as genuine partners in economic activities. If that assessment is accurate, then the prospects for real peace, and even genuine support for efforts to promote peace, are sadly dimmed.

Ed Wiebe served with MCC in Ontario and Manitoba before moving in 2001 to his current assignment in Belgrade, Serbia, as an organizational consultant with two local organizations, Bread of Life and the Inter-religious Centre.

Yugoslavia or Serbia-Montenegro?

There is no country called Yugoslavia since the name of the country was officially changed to Serbia and Montenegro in 2003. Although Serbia and Montenegro (also referred to as Serbia-Montenegro) came into existence as one entity in early spring of 2003, much remains to be done in terms of joint governance. A constitution has not been adopted and it never will be, say some commentators. The current status has a three-year opt-out clause, and either side may use it before all aspects of the joint state are harmonized and adopted. There is little enthusiasm on either side and it seems that much of the impetus for the formation of Serbia-Montenegro came from the European Union and other European institutions. Both sides consider themselves as friendly to the other and there is trade between the two, but there is little interest on either side in a joint state.

—Ed Wiebe

◆ What do you expect of those who fear their own shadow? ◆

Living the Gospel of Peace in the War-Torn Balkans

by Dimitrije Popadić

◆ Two wise men do not tear a thread, but for two stupid men even a chain is not strong enough. ◆

Being the coworker, mentor, and friend of over two hundred Novi Sad Theological College (NSTC) students, with multiethnic backgrounds from 21 Christian denominations of former Yugoslav republics, I am in the privileged position of being enriched by their ministry and life experiences and their contextualized theological reflections.

In this article I will present four brief life stories, each related to a student's firsthand experience of what it means to live the gospel of Christ, the Prince of Peace, in the midst of the bloody Balkans. These four students are Robert Bu, humanitarian worker, second year student, and Hungarian Catholic; Darijo Šehić, youth pastor, fourth year student, and Bosnian member of the Christian Fellowship; Mirčo Andreev, denominational leader and mission director, master's degree student, and Macedonian member of the Evangelical Church; and Dragan Radanović, NTSC staff, fourth year student, and a Serb member of the Christian Fellowship.

Robert Bu

The Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization (EHO), in which I work since 1996, has responded to the challenge of "the great wave of refugees" of 1995, which resulted in the 60,000 registered (and many non-registered) refugees in the Novi Sad region. The multiethnicity and traditional tolerance of Novi Sad, the second largest Serbian city, has attracted many of those who survived the life shipwreck caused by nationalism in Bosnia or Croatia and who are now looking for the new beginning.

Among many other activities, EHO, with support from Mennonite Central Committee, organized the repatriation of the refugees back to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Also, until the time of the 1995 Dayton Agreement that ended the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it organized and held ecumenical and interconfessional (Christians, Jews, and Muslims) prayers for peace in the Balkans.

I believe that in our relief ministry we did our best in the given situation, which was devastating. The 1990s were the years of deep crises, years of hyperinflation, poverty, and sanctions. Nevertheless, I regret that we did not have much time to ask ourselves

questions such as: What is peace and what is reconciliation? Who is guilty? Is forgiveness all that it takes?

I have the impression that we Christians tend to prematurely speak about forgiveness and to generalize and water it down. In fact, the generalization of forgiveness could nullify personal responsibility and could mislead the guilty party toward passive participation in the reconciliation process. Instead, as responsible Christian leaders, I believe that we should lead the parties toward healthy dialogue, which implies active listening versus passive participation, and which seeks feedback and interaction.

The subject of peace and reconciliation dialogue should be everything that caused pain and suffering, everything that influenced segregation of people and space. Aren't all human beings equal? Is it a sin to respect and love your neighbor of another nationality? The true way of peace and reconciliation is the way of honesty and courage, the way that takes away all barriers of prejudice and looks "the enemy" straight in the eyes with an open mind. Reconciliation implies not just living among our neighbors but living with our neighbors.

It is with great enthusiasm that I am leading Youth Fellowship Without Limits, a project that aims to ease the social integration of the refugee children with the local children. Last year, we added to that program an educational focus in which we explicitly promote peaceful existence based on Christian values, bringing children from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina over to Serbia.

I believe that our Christian convictions demand revitalization of church action in such a way that its ministry will support quality of life and human dignity regardless of the nationality, sex, social status, or faith; enhance justice and peace; and create a community where all neighbors live peacefully. It is our Christian faith, I believe, that drives us to the actions of peacemakers, to rebuild what was destroyed in the 1990s. There should be no shadow of doubt in our Christ-like response in a time such as this.

Darijo Šehić

I was never able to understand how people could hate each other just because they have

a different first name or family name. I do not support any form of war. The war in Bosnia for me was always absurd and I was confused about it, and not just because I was a boy when I escaped from Sarajevo.

Later I realized that the wars here were in fact caused by the manipulation of our people's immature and weak national identity by the politicians and higher forces, that is, those who control the politicians and their parties. Today when I look back at the events in the past, I ask myself, Did anyone gain anything in the conflicts here that lasted for over six years?

We lost so much. Borders have been uprooted, border crossings have been set up, visas have been suspended, and after everything we went through, I believe anyone could ask, "Why was there a war?" People who were once considered heroes are now in hiding or in jail. Everything we have now we could have had ten years ago without war or any loss of life. Some say the politicians are to blame, other say the Americans, while others say it is our fault that we let them.

However, finding out whose fault it is won't bring back the thousands of lives that were lost in the conflicts. In the city where I was born there are more graveyards than parks for the children. Life goes on, people continue living, but the loss of someone who was close remains a deep scar.

National identity is strengthened and empowered maybe by practicing one of the religions, which we faced as an obstacle when trying to win Muslims for Christ. When I talked to people in Bosnia about Christ, many times they told me that I was trying to destroy someone else.

In the eyes of the Muslims I was an Orthodox Christian, from whose cross they suffered for four years. For the Orthodox I was a person who wanted to destroy the Orthodox Church and the Serbs by means of "American teachings about Christianity"; I was a sectarian, an enemy.

But whatever opposition I ran into, I was aware that these peoples needed to hear the message of the gospel, to hear the message of God's love and to meet God. To be in a way a prophet is to pick up your own cross and to endure the things Jesus went through: misunderstanding, opposition, and rejection.

Peace is not the absence of war. True peace is peace with God. The mission of the church is to proclaim this, to be the true prophetic voice, no matter what the cost.

Mirčo Andreev

Generally speaking, I do not believe that the Macedonian traditional churches did much in recent time of crises. I remember that during one of the nationalistic meetings in Skopje, an icon of Christ was displayed, so the message was: Christ is with us, supporting in our fights. That sent the wrong message to the opposite side.

On the other hand, once again it is proven that "small" churches, which are usually not made up of only one ethnicity, play a significant role in the postconflict period. The main reason for this is that these congregations are open equally to everyone, and especially to those who are suffering. As a result, there are different ethnicities present.

Specifically in our case, which took place in Macedonia during the Kosova crisis, which soon overflowed into Macedonia, the Evangelical Church in the Republic of Macedonia was tested in peacemaking, compassion, and building mutual trust and tolerance. The Evangelical Church was involved in a significant number of relief and development projects.

During the crisis in 1999, when Macedonia overflowed with refugees, we were organized by means of our humanitarian ministry so that we were able to show our compassion and God's love toward those people. Over 50,000 refugees were aided with food, clothing, hygiene articles, and medical assistance. Some of them were even provided with housing.

During that time several other projects took place, from which the Albanian side benefited. One of the most symbolic examples was the building of an 80-meter bridge across the river Pčinja in the village of Srednjo Konjari near Skopje, which is inhabited by a predominantly Albanian (Muslim) population. It was a much bigger step building the mutual trust than the length of the bridge itself.

In 2000, when the conflict engulfed Macedonia, the Macedonians and the Albanians became direct enemies and in those times as well the Evangelical Church persisted in spreading the message of peace. At the time of greatest food scarcity, we sent hundreds of tons of food to some of the Tetovo region's Albanian villages. This was acknowledged by all the Albanian-language papers with great gratitude, and was shown as an example of building mutual trust.

◆ Crying over your country is not a shame. ◆

◆ A bird without a nest will go from branch to branch. ◆

◆ If somebody wants to have a war, let them have it in their own house. ◆

In crisis or not, the church of Christ should always play its prophetic role with both deeds and words. This means that it should always distinguish justice from injustice regardless of the price that has to be paid. No matter what might be said against it, it should never compromise with evil. It should always speak the words of God, and not the words that would please people in order to “win” their favor. The greater the crisis, the greater the responsibility for the church to be vox Dei, and not vox populi.

Dragan Radanović

From June 1999 to March 2000 I worked for the Protestant humanitarian organization Duga (Rainbow) in the city of Novi Sad, Serbia. Up to 1999 Duga was helping the residents of Novi Sad and its suburbs, many of them refugees who fled from the former republics of Yugoslavia. The 1999 NATO aggression on Former Yugoslavia and the loss of Kosovo were the culmination of these crises. After the NATO bombardment, the economic situation of the local people was so bad that many of them desperately needed humanitarian aid.

Recently I saw a cartoon showing a man cutting the branch on which he is sitting. The devil stood by the tree saying, “Later, he will blame it on the devil.”

As a believer I think that something similar has happened to us. For years our people tried to light a candle to God and a smaller one to the devil. Similar to Rachel, we’ve been hiding the idols in our saddle. Even so, deviating from the truth and cherishing pride and self-justification brought only death and damage (as it did for Rachel). The idols brought their curse.

As I reached out with aid parcels, I was deeply moved by many tragic life stories, and they came one after another: a single mother from Bosnia whose husband was tortured in the Muslim prison for year and a half; a Romany (Gypsy) from Priština, Kosovo, whose son-in-law was stabbed in the neck with a screwdriver by the Albanian militants; a young woman from Novi Sad who ended up in a wheelchair suffering from incurable Wilson’s disease after her mother-in-law put a spell on her.

We as the Body of Christ on earth are called to incarnate the Lord’s healing ministry to the bleeding world, and so we are doing as

much as we can. Nevertheless, what people need is much more than the rice, macaroni, and soap; it is the Lord himself and the life-giving light of his gospel. To my joy, I witness the dramatic transformation of those who accept him. They start to live a new life! Nada (meaning “Hope”), whom I already mentioned as a Wilson’s disease patient, has accepted Christ and experienced healing of both her body and soul. Presently, she has a three-year-old daughter, by the name of Vera (meaning “Faith”).

On the other hand, it is true that we spent centuries under the crossfire of Western and Eastern selfish interests. It is true Yugoslavia was a splendid idea—unfortunately, built on bad foundations and ignoring the question of national identity. But it is also true that God is good and is always ready to offer a new beginning to those who earnestly yearn for it.

The extraordinary creative potential of our people, a general trend of world integration, and a new understanding of the importance of cross-Christian cooperation represent possible factors in the renewal of Serbia and Montenegro. This is the chance for the church to fulfill its purpose and bring Christ and his freedom to our nation.

Conclusion

In the light of these students’ stories, I want to confirm that we, as Christians, should not be caught by surprise with the injustice and the atrocities of the Balkans catastrophe. The Scripture says that in the end times, nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and in the Balkans this has almost become a way of life. Christ himself, as we profess in the Apostles’ Creed, has “passus sub Pontio Pilato,” “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Therefore, we as followers and servants of Christ should also have full confidence that in the midst of destruction, hatred, and hopelessness, there is real opportunity and hope of resurrection to a new life and strength for individual and corporate forgiveness and reconciliation—but only the one that the gospel can offer.

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◆ A person without freedom is like a fish without water. ◆

How to Turn Bad into Good

by Ivan Vacek

After the disintegration of Communist Yugoslavia in 1990, Croatia declared independence following its first parliamentary elections. Croatia has 4.8 million inhabitants, of which about 86 percent are Roman Catholic, with other religious groups including the Serbian Orthodox Church (9.0%), Islam (5.0%), Judaism (0.1%), and churches in the Reformation tradition, which comprise around 0.2 percent.

The separation from the existing republics did not pass peacefully. War broke out in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In these newly declared states, Serbs did not accept the separation from the Serbs in Serbia. They were supported in revolt by the government policy of “Greater Serbia” in Serbia and Montenegro and by the leaders of the Yugoslav Army. After four years of war, the borders of the former republics were recognized as state borders. During this period unemployment, destruction, ethnic cleansing, displacement, and crimes occurred among the three peoples: Croats (Roman Catholic), Serbs (Orthodox Christian), and Bošnjaks (Muslim).

Duhovna Stvarnost (“Spiritual Reality”) is the leading Christian publishing house among the churches of the Reformation tradition in Croatia. We at Duhovna Stvarnost found ourselves caught up in the war in Croatia and later in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We wanted to help as well as we knew how, to add to the assistance provided by many partners.

How can you help if you don’t love somebody? How can you love somebody if you don’t know that person? How can you help if you don’t know the problems of the other person? How do you solve problems if you have never been in a similar situation? Why criticize others who aren’t doing anything to solve the problems if you yourself haven’t undertaken anything?

Responding to War

Working in a Christian organization, surrounded by good coworkers with a vision of spreading the good news and peace among people, we could have said that we were doing our part by publishing Christian literature. During the war we learned that it isn’t like that. War in my country threw us out of our office chairs.

These were terrible times, or perhaps the most fulfilling times in our lives, which meant being and feeling useful. Someone finally needed and wanted our love, “our salt and our light.” We met many people in need and we strove to encourage them a bit, to make their lives easier. We got to know our neighbors better. We met people with different faith principles and together we helped each other to help those in need.

Every war has its war profiteers—that’s mostly why wars are fought. War and its consequences are the worst that can happen to a country and to a people, and the people are easily led astray and manipulated. Everyone needs to do what is possible to keep war from coming, but once it happens we need to strive to turn its evil into good.

If there never had been a war, I probably never would have eaten and slept in so many Muslim family homes in Bosnia. After the war I visited more Serb houses in Croatia than ever before. I met some wonderful people and grew to love them. If we want to help we need to love those whom we help, and then it is important that in giving them help we don’t hurt them, that our projects not become more important than those they are intended for. Building trust is a long process, but there is a way.

Through the help of many organizations and individuals, Duhovna Stvarnost was able throughout the war to distribute help in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina worth over \$10 million.

During the war, the existing industry was destroyed and agriculture lagged. Livestock holdings were almost completely destroyed. Village economies were destroyed and burned and their inhabitants became refugees and displaced, while unemployment ruled on all sides. Whoever wanted to return had to begin from the beginning, and besides that found mines in their destroyed houses, yards, and fields. The natural balance was destroyed so that in some areas wild animals destroyed the first crops, which had been sown with such effort.

In the war, relationships between people were also destroyed. Many mixed marriages between Croats and Serbs, Serbs and Bošnjaks fell apart. This affected the wider family, neighbors, and friends. It wasn’t easy to

◆ In a war there are no brothers. ◆

Who Are the Bošnjaks?

After 500 years of being part of the Ottoman Empire, Bosnia had a significant percentage of the Muslim faith. Although nationalists have often claimed that the Muslims are Turks or do not belong to Bosnia, they are Slavs as are other residents of modern Bosnia. When Serbian and Croatian national identity arose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for some time these people could only declare themselves as either Serbs or Croats of Muslim faith. In this way they distinguished themselves from the Orthodox or Catholic Christian faiths predominant in these national groups.

In Tito’s Yugoslavia these national (ethnic) categories continued until 1974, when the category of Muslim was created as a national identification with equal status for the first time. However, this term also led to confusion because many ethnic Muslims were very secular and were thus associated incorrectly with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. For this reason most cultural and political groups have begun to refer to themselves as Bošnjaks, although “Muslim” continues to be used as an ethnic identification in everyday use.

—Randy Puljek-Shank

Pontanima Choir, a project of the MCC-supported Face to Face Interreligious Service in Sarajevo, Bosnia, received word in December 2003 that it won an award for peacemaking from Search for Common Ground (SFCG). Among previous recipients of SFCG awards are Jimmy Carter and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The choir was nominated by a staff member at SFCG, who read the article about Pontanima in the September 2003 issue of MCC's a Common Place magazine. Pontanima is made up of people from all of Bosnia's religious and ethnic groups, the same groups who fought each other during the war, and members sing each other's religious music.

—MCC News Service

◆ Freedom is more necessary than food. ◆

help in such a complicated situation. Returning trust that has been lost is the most difficult, but we found a good partner in the Orthodox Church. By our name they could easily conclude that we are not from their nationality, but that wasn't important anymore.

Trust was built up by learning to know each other, days spent visiting many half-deserted villages. Every time we rejoiced that things were gradually improving. So often we saw that what people most needed was that somebody listen to them, pat them on the shoulder, drink coffee, and sit at their table. Probably that is the way those that we came to help want to show love in return.

In one village in the Kordun, formerly a firmly Communist and Serb area in which I had never been before, lives an old woman with her husband, daughter, and grandson. They are not part of any of our projects, but since the young woman is quite capable, she helps to coordinate projects to help others in the village. The wife knows that I love homemade corn bread, so when she knows I am coming she gets up at the crack of dawn to make bread from flour ground by hand for several hours out of several kilos of corn, all so that she can offer me a hot piece of corn bread with pride. That kind of bread can't be found anywhere else—it has much love "milled and baked" into it.

Helping Those in Need

It's not easy to listen to grief and be helpless, but it is worse to give people false hopes and empty promises. It means being realistic and explaining that from the beginning of the project until its final execution is a long process, and that perhaps nothing will come of it, when they are in a hurry. Their question is how to survive tomorrow, not what will be in several months or even longer.

These are all problems that burden us in our striving to help others. We are only a small link in the whole chain, not wizards with a magic wand with which to make the world better. But we have hope. We know that it's not easy in a country that has been impoverished by war, with a heritage of Commu-

nism that is still very present in many habits and ways of thinking. I think that as Christians we need to be included in the changes in our societies. We need to show that we really believe that despite differences we can live together and help each other, but we need to really believe that.

Everyone needs to have the right to return to his home; his choice needs to be whether he wants to return or not. I often say that I don't believe anybody can love a village, a hill, or a field as someone who was born there, but they need to decide by themselves whether they want to return. We also need to help those who have decided to look for their happiness elsewhere.

Duhovna Stvarnost continues to print Christian literature, but we also have several other projects. On a farm close to Zagreb until recently we had displaced families from Croatia (who have since returned home) and refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is a microcosm that witnesses that coexistence is possible. Refugees from Bosnia (Bošnjaks and Croats) work on projects to help Serb returnees in Croatia.

Besides coexistence we are learning a new relationship toward nature, work, and life. Christian principles are not easy and often they do not yield quick economic results, but for us they are important and we want to transmit them to the people who live and work there. The farm is 23 acres, on which are buildings necessary for 21,000 chickens and a flock of 80 to 150 sheep. In the last 6 years we distributed 35,000 chickens to returning families of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, 10 to 15 per family. Some decided to return and stay just because of those chickens. The sheep project (30 ewes and 1 ram) has included 8 returning families. We continue to coordinate some projects with Bošnjaks (Muslims) in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

We hope that through our work we can mitigate the evil that has happened as well as being a reliable partner for those who have sent assistance via us.

Ivan Vacek is vice president of Duhovna Stvarnost, a Christian organization founded by Baptists in 1968, located in Zagreb, Croatia.

The Song Echoed Again . . .

by Sami Piraj

The village of Luginishta in Prizren is situated near the border of Kosova with Albania. This village is like many other postwar Kosovar villages: it is almost completely burnt down and has suffered great human losses. The school has been burnt down. When we visited the village in May 2003, the villagers were just returning from exile in Albania and starting to build a new life.

The lessons were held in improvised classrooms in a shipping container, which lacked the minimum conditions needed for a school because of the terrible war. The most important thing for the work of our team was the presence of the children. The school principal had organized parents to join our “mission” (as some of the schoolteachers called our work). It was mostly mothers who joined our gatherings because some of the fathers were dead, killed by the Serb paramilitary troops.

We split into classes as planned in advance. Children were accompanied by their most loved ones. The classes were packed; chairs scraped the floor as people made room for all those interested. I welcomed them and thanked them for presenting themselves in such a great number.

The air was very hot inside the container, heated by the burning sun of May. I slowly took out my violin from its case. There was a strange expression on some of the children’s and parents’ faces. They all watched attentively as I gripped the violin bow and started to move it easily on the well-tuned strings. The sweet and soft melody of the “queen of instruments” started to echo slowly in the room. A shivering calm made me feel a bit afraid! What was going to happen now in the classroom?

When I started singing a nice song for children, I heard the voices of some talented children joining me slowly, and then boldly. Soon some other children joined the group. In the meantime, the shy ones were trig-

gered, too. The song spread all over the small classroom. It started echoing beyond the walls of the classroom. Each repetition became rhythmically and melodically stronger until it burst out with all the hidden passion accumulated inside the children in the last couple of years. The outburst had already reached its climax when the choir joined. The song electrified the air and became an inseparable part of each one of us because everyone had mastered it by now.

Releasing Their Souls

While the children were releasing their souls from the nightmares of the last two dreadful years, the parents couldn’t hold back their tears. On one side there was the song and on the other there were tears. A strange feeling it was. It was the sound of weeping and singing combined with the tones of the violin, which reminded us once again of the ones who had died and of our old saying: “The man’s weep is his song.”

I also couldn’t hold back my tears, but the music was stronger and had an optimistic spirit planted by the children. Afterward, the best wishes and good words flowed from everywhere. After two long years the song echoed again inside the improvised classrooms. The gloom and the worry inside the souls of the children and the parents were broken. Because life goes on . . .

We had similar feelings in other schools where our team worked. On our team we consider the work with the children, the most delicate members of our society in these times of trouble, as the most essential work.

Sami Piraj is a Kosovar Albanian musician working with the Close to Children Organization, which is based in Pristina and sponsored by the MCC Global Family Program to work with Kosovar survivors of the Serbian violence through different arts: music, acting, art, and poetry.

◆ When people see force they think that justice is there as well, but they do not even know that justice and force can hardly be found together. ◆



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Further Reading on Former Yugoslavia

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—This list was compiled by Amela and Randy Puljek-Shank.