

Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Hungary: Old Wounds and New Wars

by Dan Turner

We took the train from Vienna to Zagreb, Croatia, where we were hosted by Franciscan monks, as we were in most towns throughout Croatia and Bosnia. We came to see the devastating effects of war in the former Yugoslavia and to pray with and for the people. In eastern Croatia, we witnessed the destruction in Lipik, on the border of territory occupied by Serbian troops. Everywhere, homes were pock-marked with bullets and shrapnel. These villages looked like scenes from World War II. As we walked through Lipik, elderly people leaned on their gates. Some were weeping. A pilgrim walked over to one old woman who kissed her and held on to her. The pilgrim handed her a rose which had been given to her in the previous village. We met with refugee groups here and elsewhere in the country to pray with them and hear their stories of suffering and hope. Their longing for peace was galvanizing. We promised to carry their stories back to our countries.

We encountered organizations of courageous women working for peace in spite of great obstacles: *Through Heart to Peace* was an interfaith group working with refugee women, children and the elderly. They told us that this is a war against women.

A Croatian soldier learning to fold peace cranes



Photo: Skip Schiel



On the Dalmatian Coast

huge interfaith prayer vigil in their church which over one thousand people attended. The church could hold no more. Two days later we took a train and then an overnight ferry to the ancient Roman seaside town of Split on the Adriatic. We walked the coastline with the sea shimmering on our right, the mountains looming above us on our left. We went up, over and through them to get to Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Everywhere we walked United Nations' convoys passed us going to and from the war zones. We must have looked like a line of refugees chanting its way towards the war, instead of away from it. We arrived at our destination—the divided town of Mostar, once the cultural capital of southern Bosnia.

In east Mostar, there were no roofs left intact from the shelling. There were no walls one can trust to stay standing. There was no heat and no hot water—and sparse electricity. In east Mostar, the sound of metal and mortar falling from ruined buildings was as common as the sound of the wind rushing down from the mountains—the

Mothers for Peace was another group working against fascism and decrying the raping and concentration camps that have victimized so many thousands in this terrible war. We listened, hearts aching, to their suffering.

Before we left the city of Zagreb, the pilgrims and Franciscans held a

mountains which surround east and west Mostar like the embrace of a mother holding a child. But this embrace turned into a death-hold as rockets and mortars rained down upon the town from the mountain ridges. East and west Mostar, which lived in harmony as a unified town for centuries, no longer do so for the killing that has gone on. East Mostar is Muslim, and west Mostar is Catholic.

The Orthodox Serbs and the Catholic Croats had attacked the Muslims in east Mostar, both because they wanted territory and wanted to be rid of the Muslims. But the Serbs also wanted Croatian territory, leading them to attack their former enemy from the Second World War—two Christian peoples locked into a destructive, brutal killing war against one another, and both against the Muslims. Eventually, the Croats and Muslims joined together to try to survive the Serbian onslaught.

We lived in an unheated classroom and slept on the floor of a college in west Mostar. Only our body heat kept us warm. Fifty-seven of us had to share a single cold water tap for washing, laundry and meal preparation. A hole in the floor was the toilet. We experienced for nearly a week the way the refugees in this town have to live indefinitely.

We spent days in both parts of the town, seeing the ruined mosques and the antique jewel that was east Mostar now a jagged ruin, testament to the obscenity of war. We saw the heroic work of the doctors and nurses in east Mostar. They worked without pay and had alarmingly little equipment. I asked a doctor how he and others kept up their spirits. He looked surprised and said simply: “The people need us.”

The cathedral in west Mostar had shell holes in the roof and the floor was cratered. In tears, the priest there told us that while a number of groups had come to see the town,

the Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life was the first group that came to pray. We fasted for two days and prayed a full day in each section of the town. In east Mostar, the people gathered around us and watched in silence all day. In the afternoon they brought us hot, sweet tea to lift our spirits. The children played and chatted. At times, we let them bang the drums. From our interfaith altar, which held the images of the major faiths, one angry Muslim man grabbed the crucifix and dashed it to the ground, an enraged reaction towards a symbol of the Christians whom he saw as his enemies. Sasamori quietly replaced it, and the young man walked away.

In west Mostar, no one came to our prayer vigil. The police made us hold the vigil in an isolated spot. Yet, in the cold afternoon, a family of four found us and gave us hot tea. Wherever we went on the Pilgrimage, even in areas of war and conflict, people cared for us.

We tried to get into Sarajevo but could not find transportation, and the firing on civilians increased. We decided to try to go to Belgrade, Serbia by way of Hungary. We went on to Budapest, Hungary where we stayed for a week at the Gate of Dharma Buddhist College, immersing ourselves in the art and culture of this great city of the Austro-Hungarian empire while trying to get visas for Serbia.

One day we made a long peace walk in Budapest, stopping at various churches and conducting prayers for peace. But the most poignant place we prayed at was an old synagogue down some narrow side streets. It was unattended now because most of its congregation had been murdered by the Nazis during World War II. We stood in the courtyard. A bird flew in and out of a broken window. We offered prayers in Hebrew and English and Japanese for the

spirits of the dead. We stood long in a silence which seemed to be filled with the presence of those who had suffered—the sound of our prayers must have blinked them into our awareness. They were with us. An emotion of love and sadness swept through the pilgrims: *Blessed Jews; beloved brothers and sisters, may you rest in the Land of Promise. Your deep, deep suffering has helped to humanize us—but at what a cost! We shall never forget. We can never forget.*

From Budapest we crossed into Serbia by train. We went by twos or threes, acting as separate tourists or study groups. Soldiers questioned us closely on the train as we crossed the border, but we passed their scrutiny. We got off at the town of Vbras in Vojvodina, Serbia. Our organizer there said we could walk as a peace group to the outlying town of Feketic (about 10 miles) where we were to stay the night before proceeding to Belgrade the next day. This seemed very risky, given that Serbia would not allow a peace group to enter the country. Nevertheless, we walked through the town, drumming and chanting. The people looked on with curiosity. A few waved. The local police even escorted us to Feketic—but I had the distinct impression they had no idea what or who we were. The reception by the town officials in Feketic and the ecumenical group (Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox) that housed us was warm and hospitable. They told us that the rich farm lands have no one to farm them. During “socialism” the

Bombed church, two weeks after Christmas



Photo: Skip Schiel



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young flocked to the cities and left the old people to work the land, and now the old ones were dying. The ecumenical group is trying to develop programs to get people back to the land. Every Wednesday they meet to pray for peace.

In the morning, as we walked back through the town of Vbras, we were detained for three hours by the same police who had escorted us the day before. Over our protests, they held us in custody and made us miss our train to Belgrade. But we soon settled down and taught the police guards how to fold peace cranes—transforming their gruffness into apologies for detaining us.

We found out that the Serbian officials in Belgrade had discovered who we were: a Peace Pilgrimage. They sent word to the police in Vbras to detain us and take our passports, which were given to a government official who

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canceled our visas. He held on to the passports until we were bused to the border of Hungary and deported from Serbia. Our organizer in Serbia told us then that he feared this was a sign that the war was going to intensify, and the government wanted no peace groups around to reflect negatively in any way on the conduct of war. As it turned out, he was right. Again we found that the people we met briefly in Serbia want peace, that they are working for it and praying for it in an interfaith community.

Once we had been forced out of Serbia and were back in Hungary, we left our winter clothes behind to be given to the people in Bosnia. We turned our faces towards the Middle East and Israel.