

A Circle of Reconciliation in Bosnia



by Doug Hostetter

FIVE YEARS AGO the Dayton Accords brought to an end the military aspect of the war in Bosnia. Two hundred and fifty thousand Bosnians lost their lives and over two million Bosnians were driven from their homes during that three-and-a-half-year brutal war. The world learned a new term: “ethnic cleansing.” Ethnic cleansing, a phrase coined by Serb politicians, is the forcible removal of all people of a different ethnic or religious group from an area, leaving it “clean” of all “impurities.” In most cases ethnic cleansing was a euphemism for genocide: heavily armed military and paramilitary forces attacked unarmed civilians whose only crime was that they were of a different ethnic group than the military. The civilians were at times killed on the spot, and at other times were sent to concentration camps where the political, economic, intellectual and religious leaders were identified and transferred to death camps. The remaining women, children, and non-elite were then driven from the communities where their ancestors had lived for 400 years. For many Christians it is particularly painful to learn that the military and paramilitary forces were usually Serbs (but at times also Croats) who claimed to be Christian while their victims were almost always Muslims.

On July 1, the FOR Interfaith Reconciliation Work Camp and a small Bosnian non-governmental agency welcomed a caravan of over 200 Bosnian Muslim refugees who were moving back to Stari Grad (Old Town), the oldest section of Prijedor. This was no small miracle.

Prijedor, now located in the Serb sector of Bosnia, is notorious as a center of war crimes and ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian war, and Stari Grad was its epicenter. The section was a natural target for Serb ethnic and religious nationalists because it was the oldest and most predominantly Muslim part of town. The city of Prijedor began in Stari Grad where, in the 17th century, the first mosques and Muslim homes were built. Of the 186 homes, shops, and mosques that made up the quarter in the spring of 1992, only two were left standing after the war. One Serb home and a hunting lodge remained—everything else was completely leveled. On

July 1, aside from the one Serb family, no one had lived in Stari Grad for eight years.

In late May, Prijedor refugees from all over Europe had gathered in the town of Sanski Most, just across the border from Prijedor on the Bosnian Federation side. On July 1, at around 9:00 am, the group proceeded in a caravan of cars the last fifteen miles through Serb territory to their former home.

A United Nations SFOR (Stabilization Force) armored personnel carrier staffed by Czech soldiers had unobtrusively slipped in under the trees by the old hunting lodge the night before, and an SFOR Black Hawk helicopter circled the sky at the edge of town as the caravan rolled into the ruins of Stari Grad. No one was quite sure how these Muslim former citizens would be received by their Serb neighbors, or by the current Prijedor government. But the few Serb policemen patrolling Stari Grad smiled uneasily and extended their

hands in handshakes, which were readily accepted by the returning Muslims. The one Serb family still living in Stari Grad warmly greeted their former neighbors, opened their tool shed to share shovels and rakes, and welcomed everyone to use their well for water.

This return had not been orchestrated by the UN or by international NGOs capable of rebuilding homes for returning refugees. The war had already been over for four and a half years, and nothing had happened; the UN guarantees of refugees' right to return had begun to ring hollow. So these refugees decided to organize their own return. They set up housekeeping in tents while they started to build new houses on the sites of their ruined homes.

There was so much work to do, and so little time before dark, but the Foundation for Returnees and Reconstruction of Prijedor (the Bosnian NGO that worked with the refugees for more than a year to plan for this return) was well prepared. Everyone was given jobs. The FOR work campers were easily integrated into the workforce since Anel Alisic, an FOR Bosnian Student Project graduate (May, 2000, Spalding University, Louisville, Kentucky) was one of the key organizers in the Foundation for Returnees—and also the student leader in our work camp.

An old well was soon found, recapped, and fitted with a hand pump. Sewage pipes were located, debris was cleaned from the pipes, and the first latrines were built. Rubble was cleared, and river gravel was brought in by large trucks to provide a level surface for the campsite. Holes were dug, utility poles raised, and by the end of the day there were electric lights around the perimeter.

It is hard to describe the emotional impact of being invited to work side by side with refugees who were seeing the remaining foundations of their homes for the first time in close to a decade. Our efforts in cutting brush, shoveling gravel, and helping set up latrines and utility poles felt sacred. We were physically covering the scars of war, while helping the victims of ethnic hatred reclaim their homes and rebuild a multicultural community.

After spending the morning working in 106-degree heat, everyone took the afternoon off and shared food and coffee. Nihad, our Bosnian high school student from Wilmington Friends School, translated for the work camp as we interviewed many of the refugees to learn the circumstances of their being driven out of Stari Grad. What happened to their families? How had they spent the last eight years? What are their hopes for the future? Rufus McDowell, 1999 FOR intern, preserved it all on tape for the video he is making about the experience. People were eager to tell their painful stories, and those of us who were privileged to listen (including Nihad, who had spent the war in Travnik, Bosnia, which was not occupied) will never be the same.

Prijedor had a pre-war population of 112,000 people, almost equally divided between Muslims and Serbs. Serb military

and paramilitary forces killed or drove into exile the entire Muslim half of the city's population, as well as all other non-Orthodox Christians. Four major concentration camps were located within a few miles of the city, and 3,281 Prijedor residents are known to have been killed in these camps, or are missing. Although FOR work camps in Bosnia have always worked on both sides of the ethnic border, this was the first year that our Bosnian hosts have felt it would be safe for us to live in Republika Srpska, the Serb sector of Bosnia.

The region is still raw from the war. The former commander of one of the concentration camps in the area was arrested in Prijedor and whisked off to the International War Crimes Tribunal at The Hague three days before we arrived. The week before that, a new mass grave with sixty-five bodies in it was discovered in a nearby town. If one were looking for a location to test FOR's Statement of Purpose, to "identify with those of every nation, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion who are victims of injustice and exploitation, and seek to develop resources of active nonviolence to transform such circumstances," one could hardly find a more challenging city.

FOR has deep connections to Prijedor. Fourteen of our BSP Students originally lived in the metropolitan area. Previous work camps had built relationships with Serbs in the area through English classes taught in the Prijedor Elementary School. Muharem Murselovic ("Mursel"), uncle of our student coordi-

nator, was one of the first Muslims to be elected to political office in the Serb sector of Bosnia. He had returned to Prijedor in the spring and had invited Anel to come and live with him. As Speaker of the Prijedor Municipal Assembly, Mursel joined the Foundation for Returnees in inviting the FOR work camp to come to Prijedor to help with repatriation of refugees and the teaching of English.

Dolores Gunter and I were privileged to lead a wonderfully diverse group of ten participants—eight Americans from five states, plus two Bosnian students. We were Christians, Muslims,

and Jews ranging in age from seventeen to sixty-nine. We were fortunate to have among us the chair, and one other member, of Amnesty International's US Balkan Task Force. In this deeply divided city we lived, worked, and worshipped together as an international, interfaith group. We knew that what we did and who we were would speak louder than anything we said.

We spent our mornings teaching English at the Branko Copic Elementary School. The principal and many of the students knew us well. While teaching English in Bosnia during her sabbatical in early '98, Dolores had met the principal, Gordana Dukic. She invited FOR to teach English in the Branko Copic school the following summer. That year we had stayed in the town of Sanski Most, in the Bosnian Federation, and had traveled fifteen miles each way to teach in Prijedor, since it was unsafe for us to stay on the Serb side of the border. Last summer, because of NATO bombing of Serbia and Kosova (only a few





hundred miles away), our Bosnian Serb friends felt it was politically unwise for us to organize English classes in their public school. But this year Gordana advertised our classes on Serb radio and in the Prijedor newspaper, resulting in over 130 students ranging in age from six to sixty. Our team of English teachers in this Bosnian Serb elementary school included two Bosnian Muslims, one of whom had been a pupil in that school before his family was ethnically cleansed from the city during the war.

There was so much more. We toured Serb refugee centers, talked with UN and European Union NGO officials, and stopped by mosques and churches. (Our clergy member was even invited to preach in a Prijedor church.) We visited several Muslim villages on the left bank of the Sana River, including two where Serb paramilitary forces had killed every man, woman, and child present when they arrived. We paid our respects to a mass grave with over 150 markers, mostly signifying unidentified bodies. We participated in a reception honoring the publication of *Neither Indicted Nor Guilty: The Missing of Prijedor Municipality*, a book published by the University of Sarajevo with a foreword by Irfan Horozovic (father of one of our BSP students) which chronicles the 3,281 names and birthdates of these Prijedor citizens, along with where they were last seen (usually a concentration camp). We accompanied Serb students from our English classes who volunteered to translate interviews with returning Muslim refugees. At the end, we brought together, for a final party, the friends we had made in 1998, 1999, and in the previous two weeks—Serbs and Muslims, students, teachers, and refugees.

FOR work camps in Bosnia have grown directly out of the Bosnian Student Project work during the 1992-1995 war. Each year BSP students' parents have invited our work camps into their communities. We are known and trusted before we arrive. That trust has enabled us to work effectively on issues of

concern to those communities. BSP students and their families have assisted and guided us as we explored together with Bosnians of all ethnic and religious backgrounds the power of nonviolence, tolerance, and love. We have worked in areas where other internationals have been unable to work, and have done jobs other NGOs have said were impossible to do. But perhaps most important of all, our work camps have been welcomed by Serbs, Croats, and Muslims alike.

It is difficult to gauge the impact FOR has had through the Bosnian Student Project and our work camps in Bosnia, but there are indications. There is, for instance, Anel. Anel Alisic, one of our BSP student leaders in both 1999 and 2000, decided to stay in his country and continue working with all ethnic groups through the Foundation for Returnees and Reconstruction in Prijedor. He is now the second BSP Muslim student who has gone back to live with his family in the Serb sector of Bosnia. I watched him work confidently with Serb students, teachers, and former neighbors in the community that had expelled him and his family eight years ago. I also saw him comfortably welcome back to Prijedor Muslim refugees from across Europe. Since coming back to the States, I have learned that Anel traveled to Sarajevo and convinced both Catholic Relief Service and the United Methodist Committee on Relief to come to Prijedor and build housing.

While in the Bosnian Student Project, Anel was assisted through high school by a Muslim congregation in Chestnut Ridge, New York. A Presbyterian congregation took in his family while he was studying on scholarship at a Catholic university in Louisville, Kentucky. Anel Alisic knows in his bones that Christians and Muslims can live and work together. ■

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