

Interfaith Work Camp in Bosnia

by Doug Hostetter

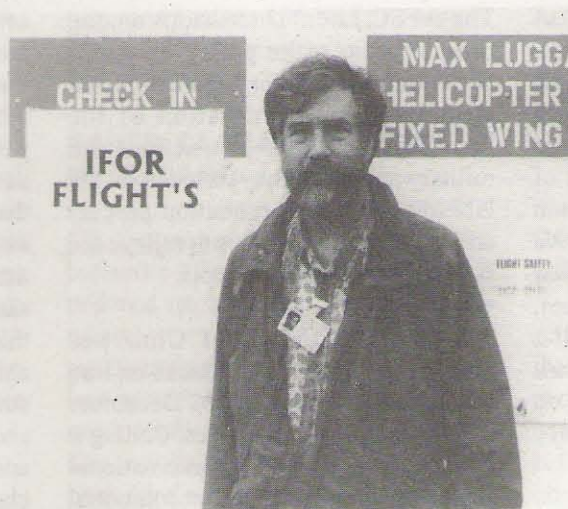
During the war in Bosnia, the FOR/USA's Bosnia Student Project (BSP) brought 154 Bosnian students to the US to study. Parents of some BSP students hosted a FOR/USA interfaith work camp in Bosnia, to introduce FOR/USA members to individuals and organizations on both sides who were interested in reconciliation.

In the summer of 1998, twelve FOR/USA members from Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious traditions, travelled to three towns in northwest Bosnia to establish an interfaith work camp. The FOR members, ranging from 17 to 65 years of age, were students and teachers, health professionals, and FOR activists. This diverse group was united in the affirmation of tolerance and pluralism, and the commitment to use the power of nonviolence to work for healing in a place of deep suffering and strong prejudice.

The three towns (Sanski Most, Prijedor and Kozarac) had been "ethnically cleansed" by Serb militia and the Yugoslav Army. Non-Serb inhabitants (everyone not from a Orthodox Christian background) were forced into concentration camps in the area, where tens of thousands of Muslims and Croats lost their lives. Sanski Most was recaptured by Bosnian Government forces in the last weeks of the war, but Prijedor and Kozarac remain under Serb control. Tensions remain high and the separation between Serbs and Muslims is profound. The FOR/USA group wore tee-shirts saying, "World peace starts right here, I will not raise my child to kill your child." We gave away shirts to people who shared that commitment: by the time we left, over 150 Serbs and Muslims were wearing the shirts.

Our most difficult work was listening to stories of unimaginable suffering.

The war ended three years ago but bodies of victims were still being discovered the week we arrived. We were invited to stand and mourn with people as they buried their relatives. Emsuda Mujagic (a speaker at the 1996 FOR/USA National Conference) organized a meeting with members of a Bosnian women's Trauma Recovery Group. One member lost her entire extended family of 34 people when Kozarac was ethnically cleansed. Emsuda herself survived both the Trnopolje and Omarska concentration camps: she was rescued from certain death in Omarska by the soldier brother of a Serb woman whom she had helped before the war.



Doug Hostetter, International/Interfaith Secretary for FOR/USA, was part of a work camp and exposure tour to Bosnia. Photo: FOR/USA

The Deputy Mayor of Prijedor, Mohammed 'Mursel' Murselovic, took us on a tour of the ancient Muslim Sector of Prijedor, an area completely flattened during the war. Mursel has the distinction of being a Muslim who is an elected official of a city now in Serb territory. Though he grew up in Prijedor, owns three restaurants, two apartments and works daily in City Hall, he is not allowed to live in his city because he is Muslim.

To begin our work in reconciliation in this deeply fractured society, we refused to recognize ethnic, national and religious boundaries among ourselves and between the Bosnians, Muslims and Serbs with whom we worked. Work camp participants lived together in a school in Sanski Most, on the Bosnian government side of the

border. Some members traveled 20 miles each morning to teach English to 137 Serb students in a school in Prijedor on the Bosnian Serb side. One such teacher was a Muslim BSP student who had attended high school in Prijedor before his parents were sent to a concentration camp. His presence in that classroom opened the way for Serb students to meet Muslims and for some Serb students to visit their former homes, now on the Muslim side of the border. The group returned in the afternoons to teach English to Muslim and Croat teachers in Sanski Most.

The camp's most dramatic event was when we returned with 500 Bosnian Muslims to Kozarac. Bosnian Serb militia and the Yugoslav Army destroyed the town in 1992, burning every Muslim home (90% of the city). Six years later, we accompanied the returning Muslim inhabitants, who had been refugees in Sanski Most or Croatia, to reclaim their deserted city.

On our last weekend we gave a party for the Serbs and Muslims from both sides of the border with whom we had worked. Though some were afraid, many came to celebrate. Teachers who had known each other before the war met for the first time in six years. Serb and Muslim students set off to explore together and returned to sing Serb and Muslim folk songs. The FOR, working with Bosnians, Muslims and Serbs—former neighbors—recreated what we all desire, a pluralistic community of friends. Not only Bosnians were transformed; we all realized that we were no longer Bosnians or Americans, but people reaching across barriers to build a just world where individuals are judged not by their nationality, race, or religion, but by the quality of their character and the way they live their lives.

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