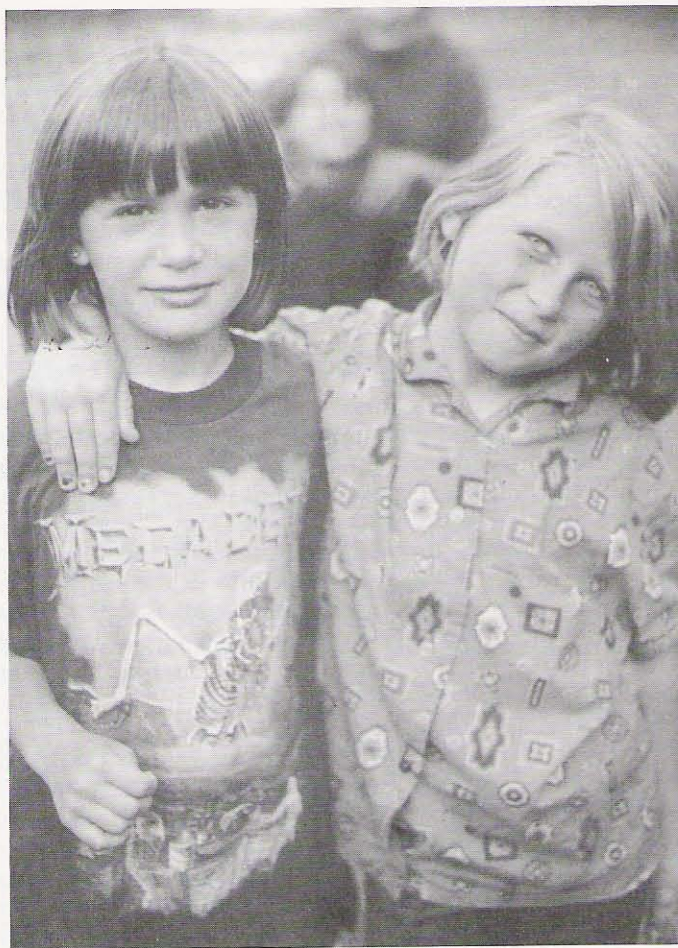


Destiny, destiny. . . God's path carries us and we carry burdens, shadows and dreams. In 1992 I left my mother's grave, my brother in tears and my father with a mechanical smile on his lips, but sadness in his eyes and a farewell message, "Good luck, my son."

*Essay for fourth grade
Mersad Konakovic
Age 10, Zagreb*

*Bosnian children in the Kruge Refugee
Camp near Zagreb. Photo: Doug
Hostetter*



Letter from the War Zone

by Doug Hostetter

Zagreb, Former Yugoslavia

On the afternoon of May 16, 1992 Mersad Konakovic, eight years old, was hurrying across an exposed intersection in the Ilidja section of Sarajevo. Without warning a Serbian sniper's bullet tore through his left shoulder, spinning him unconscious to the ground. His mother, an economist, who had crossed the same intersection moments earlier, turned without hesitation and ran back into the open line of fire to pick up her son. She was hit by a second volley of fire just a few steps from Mersad. Bleeding profusely but still conscious, she dragged herself to where he lay and wrapped herself around his unconscious body, absorbing the remainder of the sniper's deadly fire. When darkness came, neighbors rescued the child from under the lifeless body of his mother.

Mersad was evacuated from Sarajevo by the United Nations and is now living with his uncle and aunt and a young cousin in Zagreb. His seventeen-year-old brother has just finished his junior year at the only remaining high school in Sarajevo, and his father still works as an economist in Sarajevo.

Were it not for the holes in the shoulder of the jacket that Mersad still wears, and his deep voice, it would be hard to believe that this bright ten-year-old had narrowly escaped death two years ago. "Voice changes in boys and ovulation in girls at the age of eight or ten is not at all unusual for children from the war zone," the social worker explained. "It's a consequence of the trauma." The social worker who arranged my visit with Mersad at his uncle's apartment is the mother of one of the students who has

been assisted in studying abroad by the Bosnian Student Project.

The Bosnian Student Project (BSP) started a year ago when I met Tosun Bayrak, a retired art history professor from Fairleigh Dickinson University, just after he had returned from a trip to Croatia. Prof. Bayrak was also the leader of the Jerrahi Order of America, a Sufi Muslim religious order with headquarters near those of the FOR. Soon after our meeting the FOR agreed to collaborate with the Jerrahi Order to promote assistance for Bosnian students who were refugees outside of Bosnia, unable to continue their education due to the fact that they were Muslim, or children of mixed marriages. Now, one year later, with the help of countless individuals, FOR chapters, and other organizations, we have been able to place over fifty Bosnian students in educational institutions all across the US.

I am in Zagreb to visit the parents of students in the Project, to interview new students for possible placement in US schools, and to try to understand this brutal war that has already claimed the lives of three hundred thousand Bosnians and driven more than two million from their homes.

I have been unable to visit most of the parents because they live in Bosnian cities surrounded by Serbian artillery, are still in Serbian controlled Bosnia—in concentration camps, prisons or occupied villages—or are refugees in other countries. Some students have lost touch with one or both of their parents, knowing only in which occupied village or concentration camp they were last seen. I have, however, met almost all of the BSP parents who are now refugees in Croatia.

One of the most satisfying aspects of this trip was to visit Kemal and Nerma Fazlic, parents of Damir Fazlic, who is a graduate student at Butler University in Indianapolis but who stays with our family on school breaks and summer vacations. It is difficult to convey the depth of emotion one feels on receiving the hospitality of a Bosnian family whose son is in your home. As a parent I cannot imagine the pain of losing my home, being driven from my community, and then also needing to be separated from my children so that they can continue their education.

Last December, soon after Damir had arrived at our house, his mother had written, "Our small town has been burned and the intellectuals killed. Thank God, we are lucky to be alive and our sons are happy. [Their other son, Zlatan, was helped by the Jerrahi Order to get a scholarship to study in a good high school in Turkey, and if he can get a visa, he hopes to come to Denver for his final year of high school this fall.] My husband and I are very happy that there are still good people in the world who could give us a hand when we really needed it." There were now pictures to show, letters, and gifts all around. Almost every conversation was a mixture of laughter, tears, and embraces. Needless to say I got the best Bosnian cooking available anywhere outside of Bosnia.

One of the most difficult aspects of my work in Croatia is interviewing scores of students to select only a few for our remaining scholarships. We look for students who have good grades and enough English to succeed in US schools, and who are in a situation with few options available to them. In order to find those most in need we hear the stories of all, ask about their nationality and citizenship, learn how they became refugees and what happened to their parents and siblings.

I am very thankful we are working with the Association of Students of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the

when I was interviewing refugees out on the Adriatic Coast, a very bright-eyed petite fourteen-year-old girl came to interview for a high school scholarship we have open for the fall. After a few minutes of talking to her and thinking of my own twelve-year-old at home, I said, "You are really too young to come to the US and be away from your family. You should wait a few years until you are older and then apply." There was an awkward pause and she said very quietly, "My whole family is in Sarajevo. I am all alone here in Rijeka."

It is hard to grasp the enormous tragedy of this war except through the personal stories of the survivors. Maja Dragic, age seventeen, is one of the students I interviewed here this week: She is hoping to go the United States to continue high school. Maja had lived with her older sister, parents, grandparents and extended family in Sarajevo. Maja's parents, both electrical engineers, worked for the government-owned Sarajevo Electric Company. During the first weeks of the war, the family's large apartment was destroyed by shelling. The government arranged for them to move into the apartment of one of the Orthodox (Serbian) families which had fled Sarajevo before the shelling started. But that apartment, too, was destroyed by shelling. And the next. The family found a large fourth apartment, but Maja's parents decided that, for the winter, the two of them would move into small rooms closer to their work. Maja and her twenty-two-year-old sister, together with her grandparents, several uncles, aunts, and cousins, stayed in the larger space.

On January 3, 1994 Maja got up, had breakfast, and went to school. She returned around noon for a light lunch. The day was calm with almost no shelling, so around one o'clock Maja and her sister decided to go out. Her sister went to the University and Maja went to look up a friend. At three, the rest of the family gathered around the kitchen table for dinner. At 3:30 PM, without warning, a single artillery shell from the Serb-controlled mountains that surround Sarajevo crashed through the wall of the kitchen and exploded. Only her grandfather, seriously wounded, survived. In one moment Maja lost six members of her family, and her fourth home in a year and a half had been destroyed.

"After the tragedy my parents felt it was important to send some of the family out of Sarajevo. I was the only one of the family who had all of the necessary papers to leave the city. So on February sixth of this year I left the city. I left in a convoy organized by the Jewish community of Sarajevo. A Dutch friend of the family had offered some time ago to bring me to the Netherlands. Unfortunately, when I contacted our friend, Dutch laws had changed. Refugees from Bosnia were no longer welcome in the Netherlands.

"My older sister was later able to come out to Zagreb, where she got a job with a Jewish relief agency. With her salary we have been able to rent an apartment and live together. I have worked to finish my



Bosnian college students interested in studying in the US. Photo: Doug Hostetter

World University Service, both local organizations with staff in Zagreb and contacts around the region, because as an American I frequently feel foolish trying to understand the situation of Bosnians. I remember a few days ago,

RACE / RELIGION / ETHNICITY AND HATRED IN BOSNIA

In the United States, prejudice and discrimination are often built on race. Race was the basis of our own "ethnic cleansing" program in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. In Bosnia, However, race is not the issue. Bosnian Muslims, Croat Catholics and Serb Orthodox are all Slavs, racially identical. In the former Yugoslavia, it is ethnic/religious chauvinism that politicians have used to build their political base.

Many commentators describe the war in Bosnia as a religious war. If they mean that the war is fueled by religious sentiment, that one devout group is reacting against the faith of another which does not share its tenets, then the description is definitely false. Yugoslavia has just emerged from more than forty years of atheist Communist rule. Most Bosnian youths have had very little religious education, and urban youths before the war were often unaware of the different religious heritages of their friends. Over seventeen percent of Bosnian families were built upon interfaith marriages.

It is true, however, that "nationality" in the former Yugoslavia is defined as ethnic/religious background. In reality "religion"/ethnicity is determined by your last name, which usually indicates the religion of your grandparents. A priest with whom I talked estimated that between eighty and ninety percent of all Bosnian Serbs had never been baptized, less than half of the Bosnian Croats have been baptized Roman Catholic, and fewer than ten percent of the Bosnian Muslims participated in daily prayers or regularly attended mosque.

But just because Yugoslavs have not been particularly religious in recent years does not mean that opportunistic politicians could not use religious/ethnic chauvinism as a way to fuel the war and build their own powers. This in fact has been done. Bosnian Orthodox Christians (Serbs) have been organized by Serbian nationalist leaders to drive out their Bosnian Muslim and Croat Catholic neighbors. Last year when Croatia was allied with Serbia, Bosnian Catholics were organized by Croatian nationalist leaders to drive out their Muslim neighbors. There were also reports of Bosnian army units returning to villages that had been previously "ethnically cleansed" of Muslims and driving out the remaining Orthodox (Serb) population so that the previously "cleansed" population (Muslims and at times Catholics) could return.

— DH

junior year of high school. I also volunteer at the World University Service to try to help other Bosnian students continue their education. I am so excited that the Bosnian Student Project has found a family in North Carolina that wants to keep me while I finish my high school." [Editor's note: Maja arrived at her new home in Weaverville, North Carolina in late June, and will be attending Asheville High School in the fall.]

I have heard enough stories of pain to last a lifetime, but I have also learned a great deal. As I looked at the enormity of the evil in the war in Bosnia I kept wondering whether there were situations here, as there had been elsewhere in Europe during World War II, where the influence of a few good and honest people was able to keep a community from participating in genocide. It is of course very difficult for an outsider coming into a situation for only a few weeks to really comprehend how one community could slide into bigotry, hatred, and violence while another preserved a tolerant society. It is perhaps presumptuous, but I would like to list some of the hopeful signs or circumstances where a few people did make a difference.

In many conversations on this subject I have been told that there were numerous examples of people and communities who refused to be divided and to hate each other. However, if an area was considered of military strategic interest to one of the parties, that side would often simply kill everyone, even members of its own ethnic group, who refused to cooperate. The father of one of the BSP students is a doctor who stayed in his village, Bosanska Gradiska, for the first year after it was occupied by Serbs. The takeover, which met no resistance, was carried out by people from outside the community, who then worked quickly to incorporate local Serbs into their force. In the first week of the occupation, Dr. Suhonjic reported,

eleven Serbian youths from his community were brought to his hospital morgue. All had been killed by a bullet in the back. They had refused to join the occupying army, or refused orders to rape or pillage their Muslim neighbors.

If an area was not of strategic military importance, though, it was often the quality of local leadership that determined which way a community would go. The Catholic Franciscan Order, for instance, play very different roles in different parts of the country. In Southern Bosnia, in the Mostar area, the Franciscans are militant Croatian nationalists working closely with the army and nationalist forces. In the city of Mostar, Croatian forces, with the blessing of the local Franciscans, were responsible for dividing the city and largely destroying its Muslim half. In the last year over fifteen hundred Muslims, citizens of Mostar, have been killed. Yet in the central and northern part of Bosnia, the Franciscans were very often bridge-builders between Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim groups.

Outside military forces finally destroyed the local alliances and trust built by religious communities in many areas of central Bosnia, but towns like Tuzla hung together with Bosnian Muslims, Croat Catholics and Serb Orthodox maintaining a pluralistic society and trying to protect the city from outside chauvinistic political or military forces. When Serbian and Croat political leaders called on the local Catholic and Orthodox people to abandon the city and attack their neighbors, they mostly refused.

In some areas of the country local politicians consciously refused to participate in the ethnic hate game. Their communities have often been untouched by the discrimination, divisions and war that has characterized

continued on page 21

From the War Zone

continued from page 13

most of the country. The Istra peninsula in northwestern Croatia is one such area. I interviewed refugees in that area a few days ago and was amazed to learn that Muslims, Orthodox, and Catholics have lived and worked together in peace there throughout the war. Local people credited the courageous leadership of a local socialist party. The calls, even from the Croatian president, for actions against Muslims or Serbs were contradicted by the local party, and the population took heed and refused to abandon its tradition of tolerance.

I asked a local antiwar activist how the war might be stopped. He said, "We can expose the evils of the war and of genocide to the outside world. We can help the victims, and plant the seeds for a better society in the future. But at this point, there is very little we can do to stop the war. Ten years ago, when the politicians and the media started their campaigns of religious chauvinism and hatred, there was much we could have done to mobilize the people to unite against these divisive forces. We didn't take them seriously until it was too late. The peace movement in Yugoslavia got started ten years too late."

I have thought a lot about the United States as I have listened to the people of the former Yugoslavia this past two weeks. Racism, religious chauvinism, and bigotry are all on the rise in the US, while the religious right is attempting to turn the US into a "Christian country." But our society also has a historical—often neglected—attachment to democracy, tolerance, pluralism, and separation of church and state. In Bosnia the time for choices has passed. In the US there is still time to avert disaster. The actions we take, the decisions we make and the leadership we provide, can literally make the difference between life and death in our society. "Therefore, choose life." □

Doug Hostetter is the international and interfaith secretary of the FOR, who for the last year has directed the Bosnian Student Project. He was in the former Yugoslavia for two weeks in June.