

TRIP REPORT

DESTINATION: **REPUBLIC OF CROATIA**

DATES: **SEPTEMBER 24 - OCTOBER 13, 1996**

MARIE AND CHARLES MERCER

-

BACKGROUND:

In 1956, the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, USA asked us to undertake a special project in the former Yugoslavia. The project had the dual purpose of learning first-hand the conditions of the Reformed Church under the Tito regime and of offering encouragement to Reformed Church leaders whose contact with western church colleagues was limited. Because it was difficult to openly send missionaries into the former Yugoslavia in that era, the Presbyterian Church asked us to enter the country as students.

We registered at the University of Belgrade, Marie in History of Art and Charles in Slavic History. Living in a modest flat, we studied Serbo-Croatian language and became well acquainted with life in Belgrade including its hardships. In those days there was no refrigeration, marketing was done daily and there were no western products on the open market. Gradually, we began to contact ministers in the Reformed Church. The facts that Charles was an ordained minister and that the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. had sent us were revealed to only a few ministers. We were well received as fellow Christians and through visitations to churches in villages throughout the Vojvodina and Croatia we found many opportunities to encourage people in the church, particularly the clergy.

Every few months we had to apply to extend our visas. When we applied for an extension in June 1959, our application was denied without explanation. Initially, we were given twenty-four hours to leave the country but Charles asked for and was given seven days to depart. We wanted time to say goodbye and our packing was more complicated because we now had a one-year-old daughter.

We hurriedly packed and said our goodbyes to numerous friends in several villages as well as in Belgrade. The last Reformed Church members we were to see was Olga Langh, a minister's wife and her father, who met us on the road to Zagreb with some parting gifts. Olga's husband, Endre Langh, is now the bishop of the Reformed Church in Croatia. Endre and Olga were our hosts during this 1996 visit.

We never learned why our stay in the former Yugoslavia came to an end so suddenly; however, it must have been obvious to anyone watching our activities in that controlled society that we were spending more time with churches than at the university. Since the typical "Fraternal Worker" term was three years, we felt that the timing was appropriate and our goal of putting a

human face on concerned Christians from the West had been achieved. In 1978 we easily obtained tourist visas for four of our children and ourselves for a visit to six or more families of the Reformed Church.

We were delighted that our language ability returned to a remarkable degree during the 1978 and 1996 visits. Now, 40 years after our first trip to the former Yugoslavia we returned to be with our close friends Bishop Endre and Olga Langh for 16 busy days.

OBJECTIVE: TO GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING ABOUT THE CONDITIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE WAR AND THE ROLE OF THE REFORMED CHURCH AND HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES IN THIS PERIOD.

The first segment of our trip was a flight on Czech Airlines, September 24, from Newark, New Jersey to Prague, Czech Republic arriving on September 25. Again, on Czech Airlines we flew to Zagreb, five and half hours late due to unexplained reasons, but most likely the foggy weather. Endre Langh, Bishop of the Reformed Church in Croatia was awaiting our arrival amidst the smokey air of the Zagreb Airport. After a warm and tearful greeting, he drove us to his home in Vinkovci through a dark and dismal rain. Some three hours later we were greeted by Olga, his wife at their home. It was good to be back.

We made every effort to use our limited time to the fullest. To obtain the broadest possible picture we contacted many people, church leaders, displaced people, principal of a local school, a humanitarian agency, United Nations' personnel, staff at the Theological Seminary in Osijek and many others.

Ninety-seven per cent of our time was spent in Eastern Croatia, where some of the earliest fighting erupted, which later spread to Bosnia and Hercegovina. The borders of the Republic of Croatia are strangely shaped due to geography combined with past wars, the rise and fall of the Roman, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires as well as its current territorial disputes with Serbia and Bosnia. The weather map shown daily on television created an especially intriguing border. The territories which are in dispute with Serbia and presently monitored by the United Nations peacekeeping forces are included within the borders of Croatia on the weather map. These lands as well as the Croat-Muslim area of Bosnia were colored the same as the rest of Croatia while the Bosnian-Serb area was left blank.

Some of our impressions of conditions in Croatia and the role of the churches follow.

1. TOWNS AND VILLAGES ARE SCARRED.

We took long walks through the town of Vinkovci where the Langhs live. Our memory of Vinkovci is anchored in our one night stay in the local hotel in the 1950's, during a power failure. It was grim and grey. Store windows had few products and streets had horse-drawn wagons and almost no cars. The conditions in the hotel were very poor. In 1978 when we returned, the town looked vastly different. It was colorful, bustling and upbeat. Noisy with cars, the streets still served a few horse drawn wagons. We enjoyed showing the children a Serbian Orthodox Church where we stood until one of the children became faint with the aroma of incense in the summer heat. Now, in 1996, we found that horses and wagons had totally given

the streets over to a multitude of European-made cars. Shop windows hold many products, electronics and appliances. However, the Serbian Orthodox Church is gone. Bombed. In its place is a parking lot.

Actually, in our first walk around town this September, we were impressed with the healthy, colorful look of buildings and people. With more walks and a greater understanding of what had happened other impressions came through.

More than 70% of Vinkovci's homes and buildings sustained damage during the war. One third of the Langh's home had been blown away. Many roofs bare the telltale circles of new tile or totally new roofs, repaired after shelling. Facades are pockmarked from bullets and shrapnel. Some buildings are still in ruins with weeds and trees already growing up amongst the rubble. Here in Vinkovci and throughout Croatia thousands of homes formerly occupied by Serbs were blown up apparently to prevent their return or out of hatred. Whatever the motive, only a few perpetrators have been punished. Some Serbian homes, which were not destroyed, had been hurriedly vacated by their owners as they fled to Serbia. Now, Croatians, some displaced when their homes were bombed, occupy them. Yet because ownership is unresolved, the homes are left in disrepair. A large commercial building in the center of town stands as a skeletal, grim reminder of the war with all the windows and internal walls gone.

2. FAMILIES' LIVES ARE TURNED UPSIDE DOWN.

Farmers near to the fighting were evacuated by Croatian authorities or military from lands held in their families for generations. First, they were sent to Hungary. A year later they were transported back to Croatia to live in camps. These are the displaced people. When they were told to evacuate their villages, the authorities promised they could return within a few days. The date of their return is still uncertain. A peasant woman, told us that while in Hungary she had opened her bible randomly to Zephaniah 1:13 --

"They shall have riches and be plundered,

They shall build houses and not live in them."

Serb shelling destroyed homes and livestock. Sometimes, Croatian soldiers plundered the villages they were sent to protect taking dishes, mementos, wiring, plumbing fixtures, tractors while officers looked the other way. These acts of plundering were explained to us in this way: When war broke out, Croatia did not have its own army and had to scramble to draft officers as well as soldiers. The standing army (Yugoslav National Army) in Croatia had been largely commanded by Serbs. Consequently, when Croatia hurriedly created its army using untrained personnel, discipline and professionalism were lacking, leading to plundering and other egregious crimes. Some people acknowledge that terrible things were committed by both Serbs and Croats. Some only blame the Serbs.

People spoke of losing their life's savings from accounts in banks in Croatia. They had been told that Croatian Banks placed their reserves in the Central Bank in Belgrade so when war broke out the Serbs would not release it. People thus blamed the Serbs for these terrible financial losses. An UN person told us that this was not true. According to this individual, the Croatian government took reserves for the war effort. She went on to say that she frequently hears rumors and war stories with the ethnicity of the heroes and evildoers reversed.

Ethnicity divided families. In one case a widow, whose husband had been a Serb, sent her son, now regarded as half-Serb, to Serbia when the war started. She believes that her neighbors viewed this as an act of treason and consequently, bombed her home.

A villager now living in a camp for displaced people can't envision a future. Nothing is left of his home, his farm equipment or his livestock. His church building is destroyed. Even if the government rebuilds his home, he asked, "How will I work the land without a tractor and who will give me credit to buy a tractor?" "I am 65." A United Nations staff person told us that even if the villagers would be allowed to return to their villages it will not be safe because of the extensive mining of the fields.

3. THE WAR CONTINUES TO AFFECT THE SIMPLEST THINGS OF LIFE.

On two occasions we traveled by car to Osijek, a city to the north of Vinkovci. Instead of going north we had to travel west around the occupied territories adding thirty kilometers to the trip. This is not just an inconvenience it is a significant added expense for pastors who make regular trips to outlying churches. Gasoline is U.S.\$3.50 a gallon.

On one circuitous trip around the occupied territories, we reached the picturesque village of Hrastin. Here the church was heavily damaged by mortar shelling. In fact, a shell is still stuck in the steeple. The weather completed the church's destruction including some historic art work on the ceiling. Next door, the church manse had been used as a headquarters by the Serbs. When they left, the manse was trip-wired. Fortunately, a sharp-eyed parishioner noticed the wire before entering the door and put up a sign to warn people to stay away. Fortunately, they did! The church people have done some wiring themselves. The steeple with its mortar shell sends out the beautiful sound of ringing church bells taped and wired to call the faithful to church.

4. LIVING EXPENSES ARE HIGH FOR DISPLACED PEOPLE.

We met displaced people at a camp not far from Vinkovci. Looking around the camp we were surprised to see a hill right in the middle since Vinkovci and environs are quite flat. The people explained that there is so much mud in the camp in the spring time that bulldozers have to be brought in to clear it out. Thus, a hill of mud has been created over the four years of the camp's existence. There are 700 people of all ages living in barracks.

The women seem to keep busy at cooking, crocheting and making items to sell in the market. The men have a harder time filling their days. Some get day-labor jobs in town. Most have a small garden. All worry. Poignantly, our hosts showed us pictures of their beloved homes and village. We saw these fine people several times during our stay in Vinkovci because they faithfully come by bus, car or bike to the church services and bible classes.

The displaced people are supposed to receive 250 Kuna per person monthly. This is approximately \$40 U.S. However, it is not distributed regularly. They haven't received anything since June. Here are some prices to compare what 250 Kuna might buy:

- ◆ one blanket = K178
- ◆ one cup of yogurt = K6

- ◆ one liter of milk = K4
- ◆ one head of cauliflower = K15
- ◆ one kilo of sugar = K7
- ◆ one loaf of bread = K5
- ◆ one small china coffee cup = K11
- ◆ One pair of shoes = K250 - K350+
- ◆ 1 liter gas = K4.2

In the beginning all expenses in the camp were handled by the government or international relief groups. Now, the people must pay for electricity, transportation to town, heat and of course food.

5. PEOPLE CONTINUE TO EXPERIENCE STRESS.

The people we met showed remarkable resiliency. They have faced extreme difficulties and handled them with apparent success. This is fortunate because resources, such as individual or group counseling, are very limited for people who made need help. Indeed, except for extreme cases, few are seeking help. It appears that people are expected to get on with their lives. While this may be the societal norm, without help, the literature on post traumatic stress syndrome indicates that the stress of the war will continue to plague individuals to varying degrees and will likely manifest itself in increased marital and family tension, problems on the job, chronic health problems and interpersonal problems.

Clergy of all persuasions, though untrained, and perhaps even unaware of what they are dealing with, may be the best source of help. It would be truly useful, if the seminary would develop a course on counseling, marriage and the family, and specifically, post traumatic stress.

6. TELEVISION REMINDS PEOPLE DAILY ABOUT THE WAR

Daily, just around supper time, replays of videos of the war are shown. The message is undoubtedly to remind people that the Serbs are to blame for the war and the resultant problems. An objective observer noted much dishonesty in the reporting, "Nothing is said about the heroism of many Serbs who helped Croats."

7. RELIGION WAS USED IN THE WAR.

The role of churches in the war is still being analyzed. Some say they believe that the Serbian Orthodox church supported the notion of a "Greater Serbia." Similarly, some people assert that

the Roman Catholic Church, now enjoying a new power status, subscribes to nationalism in Croatia. Some say that the former Croatian Communist leaders "are now sitting in the front pews of the Catholic Church." The distinction is made between those who were Christians during the Communist period and those who have only recently come or returned to the church.

Our closest view of the role of religion was through our association with the Reformed Church in Croatia. This is a minority church consisting of nine pastors who each serve at least three churches. Before the war, the Reformed Church had one bishop over all of the Reformed Churches in Croatia combined with the Vojvodina, Serbia and Slovenia.

Churches in this Eastern part of Croatia played an important part in distributing humanitarian aid during and immediately following the war, principally through the Pentecostal agency, AGAPE.

People continue to look to the churches for aid and spiritual support. Bishop Langh reports that more parishioners visit him now about various problems than before the war.

We can attest that the small Reformed Church meeting room in Vinkovci is filled for the Croatian language service. Several times we had to struggle to find a seat. Services for Hungarian speakers are attended by only a small group of mostly elderly women.

8. LIFE GOES ON.

We made an unannounced visit to an elementary school in Vinkovci. Quite understandably, the principal was initially reluctant to admit us into a classroom. We explained (in Croatian) that our daughter, who is a special education teacher and who has two sons, asked us to take pictures of children's activities in Croatia. He finally warmed to the idea and arranged with a teacher to take us to his classroom. The teacher enthusiastically showed us around the room. It was neat and decorated with signs of Fall. He pointed out that of the 30 students only nine were girls. Several of the boys were wearing the red and white checker board coat of arms of the Republic of Croatia probably for a sport event

The teacher explained that he took the class to the Vinkovci open market yesterday and purchased pots in which they planned to grow some plants. Several students, who were being tutored privately in English, enjoyed testing their language skills with us. Otherwise, we spoke with them in Croatian. Surprisingly, crucifixes were prominently displayed in both the principal's office and the classroom. The principal proudly showed us an array of sport awards among which was an ugly mortar shell. He told us that when a delegation from the occupied territories (presumably Serbian) visited recently he also showed them the sports mementos and then pointed to the casing, "And this is the memento from you." Bombed but not destroyed, the school was closed for almost a year. We asked how the school had absorbed the influx of displaced families. He said that actually the enrollment has remained approximately the same, balanced by the number who fled Vinkovci.

9. NEW CHURCH LEADERS ARE BEING TRAINED.

We visited the International Theological Seminary in Osijek which was started by the Pentecostal Church twenty-five years ago. Bishop Endre Langh is on the Seminary's board. The seminary serves students from 20 countries and nine traditions. It has 100 students of which 40 are women. The number of women is remarkably high given the limited opportunities they have

for ministry. The Seminary church was a Jewish Synagogue before World War II. Now it is one of several buildings of the Seminary which were miraculously spared during intensive shelling in the recent war. We met Steve Kurtz and his wife Michelle, Presbyterian missionaries who teach at the Seminary. The Kurtzs were delighted to learn of our earlier ministry in a radically different period of time for Christians. They are providing an excellent ministry at the Seminary.

While showing us around the Seminary, Steve pointed out that all the windows had to be replaced after the war and that inside there were still marks on doors and walls from flying shrapnel. Endre mentioned that during the war it was common to see people wearing shredded coats although they themselves had not been injured. The coats had been hanging near to the windows.

This seminary has an excellent opportunity to prepare leaders to bring messages of healing and reconciliation as well as leaders who can minister to people in the aftermath of war. International support and contacts will be helpful in articulating and supporting this opportunity.

10. HUMANITARIAN RELIEF IS WANING.

On our way through Zagreb for our departure flight, we visited a new nonprofit agency called "Priatelj" (friend). After six months of support from a U.S. refugee resettlement agency, the funding ended and it became a free standing agency called, "Priatelj." Now located in Kozari Bok, an impoverished neighborhood, it offers a drop-in center for local children, Gypsy children as well as displaced people and refugees. We saw a group of 10 children being instructed in dance by a refugee from Bosnia, five or six young children involved in art projects and eight to ten young men hanging out or playing ping pong. On the staff is a Gypsy woman, with a degree in education of disabled children. She believes "Priatelj" promotes peace by helping diverse groups of children to play together.

Future funding for "Priatelj" is bleak. International relief and aid groups are leaving. It is unrealistic to think that "Priatelj" can find local donors since there are no track record or incentives for private donations. In addition President Tudjman's wife has established a foundation for children's projects which is likely to attract most large donors and unlikely to benefit a small agency like "Priatelj." If it folds, the children will truly lose a friend.

11. THE REFORMED CHURCH IS ALIVE WITH THE SPIRIT

One of the great joys we had during our visit was worshiping with five Reformed Church congregations in different languages -- Hungarian, Czech and of course Croatian. Charles was asked to preach on seven or eight occasions. His message openly acknowledged the pain and suffering of the people and challenged them to find strength in their faith and to follow the way of brotherhood, peace and forgiveness. (Marie's comments: I watched people as he challenged them to replace hatred with forgiveness and to rebuild with courage and peace in their hearts. There was affirmation in their faces and in the words following the services).

Marie presented a sermon for children (in Croatian) and reminded them that, like Jeremiah, are not too young to accept God's call to do kind and loving deeds to all.

Most of all we are grateful for the faithful and persevering ministry of Endre Langh. Endre has tremendous insight into the meaning of ministry, in fact, he influenced our daughter to accept her

calling to ministry. The Reformed Church is fortunate to have him as their Bishop.

SUMMARY OF OUR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

We acknowledge the dangers and fallacy of drawing conclusions and generalizations from a limited three-week experience. Yet, because of our prior experience in the former Yugoslavia, the fact that we speak Croatian, our ongoing study of the area and the quality of our contacts, we have a relatively firm basis for analyzing data, observations and experiences.

1. The rejection of communism in Eastern Europe in the fateful year of 1989, meant many things to people. Certainly the hope was for a better, freer, more prosperous life. For many people this hope was in vain. That former Communist leaders retain power under different party names is undisputed. This is certainly true in the former Yugoslavia where nationalism has been invoked to gain support. Privatization has benefitted a few people and cost many their jobs. Some people even express a longing for the former communist regime.
2. This is not a religious war, but religion is used. Whatever their motives, it appears that both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church allow or promote an intermingling of religious goals with the political agendas of their respective countries' leaders. While most Bosnian Muslims were nominal believers before the war, religion has been used as a rallying point and the fundamentalist attitude is gaining ground.
3. It is apparent that the Serbs within Croatia's borders started the fighting with the general support of the Yugoslav National Army. As fighting intensified the leaders drew on latent ethnic and religious animosity to elicit support from the public. Egregious acts of terrorism were committed on both sides.
4. Although one peasant woman decried to us that "God could not let this happen again," it appears that fighting could easily erupt when the disputed territories are to be returned and/or when the UN occupying forces and American armed forces are withdrawn or reduced significantly.
5. The role of the churches in fomenting animosities or peace is profound. The Reformed Church in Croatia, albeit a minority church is speaking for brotherhood, peace and healing.
6. Major efforts at all levels, to reduce ethnic tensions and animosities are desperately needed.

As we continue to follow events in the Balkans, our concerns will center on the following questions:

1. Will the occupied area of Eastern Slavonia be returned to Croatia in January as provided in the negotiated treaties?
2. Will the government be able to fulfill its promise to rebuild homes in the destroyed villages?
3. Will the Croatian economy recover sufficiently to provide jobs for people whose livelihood

has been lost?

4. Will democracies prevail in Croatia and the other nations of the former Yugoslavia?

5. Will minority groups and churches be protected?

6. Will the voices of those who speak for peace and reconciliation be heard?

Respectfully submitted,

Charles B. Mercer Marie J. Mercer
