

TEN YEARS LATER - REPORT AND REFLECTIONS ON REVISITING EX-YUGOSLAVIA, JUNE 1999

by Gerald & Sara Wenger Shenk

Gerald Shenk, Professor for Church and Society at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and Sara Wenger Shenk, Associate Dean at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, have been involved with Yugoslavia since the mid-1970s, as well as with CAREE, as a book review editor for REE.

After a total of almost nine years of living in the former Yugoslavia, we have been living in Harrisonburg, Virginia since 1989, working at Eastern Mennonite Seminary. Gerald has returned almost every year, first to continue with a teaching presence on an intensive basis with the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia. Later this expanded to include support and encouragement for peacemakers at work across the region during and after the years of Balkan conflagration. This was the first time the return would also include Sara (except for a brief sabbatical semester in 1993).

We were aware that we may be coming to take our leave, saying farewell at least for awhile to the ties that we've nurtured over the past 22 years. Our responsibilities at Eastern Mennonite Seminary are changing and intensifying, so it has been challenging to maintain the ex-Yugoslav relationships and to keep current with complex events unfolding across such vast distances. We provide here a travelogue of highlights from our June 7-21, 1999 journey. Rather than allowing us to take our leave for a time, the journey has energized us to work more diligently to resource local efforts for developing a peace theology and equipping church leaders with a peace theology.

Zagreb, Croatia

The city where we first arrived in 1977 is greatly changed today. Then it was the second-largest city in Tito's Yugoslavia. Today it glistens with pride as the capital of Croatia. It was almost entirely spared from the physical destruction of warfare that

raged nearby during half of this decade. But social, psychological and economic costs have been great.

Boris Peterlin is director of the Christian Information Service, which he founded during the outbreak of war in Croatia some eight years ago. Boris, a Baptist, married to Marina from the Catholic circles, is an activist and visionary for ecumenical conversation and work for peace. Several of his crucial observations:

It was no surprise to him that the struggle over Kosovo came down to bombing as a solution. This he sees as a direct outcome of the politics of relying on force, policies built on injustice, and a lack of commitment to justice on principle. The bombing is an unfortunate result of amoral calculations. It is ironic to see this also as two parallel sets of massive miscalculation.

There would be much to hope for in serious dialogue across the great divides in this region, but the other side must also take steps to make it possible. Boris seemed eager to meet Serb Christians more than halfway, but it would help if there was some evidence of openness to acknowledge what was wrong with the policies that brought on this conflict, and for what reasons.

In his own observations, he has found certain representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church to be more balanced, more aware than the Serb politicians of the real situation on the ground. Some have observed that the Serbs actually lost Kosovo long ago, back when Serbs themselves cooperated in the destruction of Orthodox churches there during the heyday of atheism. The real issue remaining is the minority rights of Serbs who choose to continue on in Kosovo. In Zagreb itself, others point to Boris as exceptional in his efforts to keep track of how Serb Christians are experiencing current developments.

Will nationalism be repudiated [we asked]? Boris replies, "What can the church be doing about this?" Bring peacebuilding and evangelism together. The greatest weakness thus far has been the lack of connection between these two. All Western projects have a built-in bias toward individualist solutions. They treat the church and religion as social groups, a second echelon of political influence, failing to address the peace-building capacity of the church as church, from the point-of-view

of its unique character. These projects typically operate with a secular ideology, the same ideology that has been developing behind the peace movement ever since Vietnam. It's hard to imagine a Pax Christi without Christ and yet sometimes it seems that is the trend.

These peace-seeking organizations come through as relating, not to the local churches, but head only to the hierarchies at the highest levels. Other religious interventions are limited to a kind of missionary activity (in the worst sense of the term), oblivious to all social aspects of metanoia. The work of the Kingdom of God must be understood in social terms. Even Miroslav Volf's fine work, *Exclusion and Embrace*, which has been translated and published in Croatia, should still be translated further into practical social applications.

Boris carries a growing concern for the integrity of conflict resolution efforts that Christians should be undertaking in this region. He insists that a Christian concern for peace must be related directly to Christian experience and commitment, not just an instrumental use for other purposes. He raises an explicit critique of training in technique and methods alone; introduction to various theories and schools of thought is fine, but it lacks Christian motivation. He feels moved to contest a growing concept of peace and human rights as secular agenda. Even the Pope's lofty language on the dignity of human rights remains ineffective, without local interpretation. Ecumenical circles pay lip service to tolerance and cooperation, but the fledgling efforts in that direction receive little or no tangible, financial support.

Boris is feeling restless to be able to do more serious reflection and study for his own contribution to the next stage of work for peace in the region. He has several ideas for books that ought to be written, with a stress on indigenous theological reflection that is not merely imported from elsewhere. He is a prime candidate for doctoral level work in this area, exploring possibilities at Notre Dame. It appears that some scholarship help would be available to him there, but family needs would be a further concern.

The new leadership in Croatia's Baptist Union is remarkably young, confident and constructive in their outlook. Gone are the days of endless denominational

bickering. This generation is schooled for cooperation. Some key staffers are Zeljko Mraz and his wife, both trained at ETS in Osijek. They exhibit moderation and balance in their perspectives.

Peter Mackenzie, long-time activist and itinerant evangelist, now pastors the large Baptist congregation in Zagreb. Often impatient with the slow pace of renewal in stolid Christian circles, he now has the satisfaction of seeing his vision for spiritual vitality take shape in one of the most influential Baptist congregations in the land. He has long nurtured good ties to the Serbian minority community in Croatia, and now reports with real delight two substantial recent offerings lifted for Kosovar refugees and for newly organized Baptist congregations among the Serbian refugees returning to Croatian territories.

Peter Mackenzie and Boris Peterlin both voiced concern over how hard it is to make contact with Baptists next door in Serbia. Courtesy calls alone are not sufficient to overcome the backlog of difficult communication across the unresolved tensions remaining from before the outright warfare. Issues that were not properly addressed before the war, plus the agenda from vastly differing perspectives on what happened during the war, require a great amount of new attention and energy. It is difficult even to identify the prospective partners for a dialogue that would be prepared to address issues new and old with gravity and respect. How do we discover in the other side those persons who are prepared to distinguish and know the critical difference between being Christian and being steeped in one's own national outlook?

Jajce, Bosnia

Traveling south from Zagreb, we passed through large parts of Croatia that lie on the inside of its boomerang shape, around the upper northwest edge of Bosnia. This is territory that the Serbs in rural Croatia had designated their "Krajina", and for several years after Croat independence they were in open defiance. Then Croat forces in 1995, with tacit approval and arms from the West, routed and dispatched the rebel Serbs, who fled through Bosnia and ended up largely unwelcome and untended in Serbia. Some were even sent to repopulate Kosovo's Serb minority. Bread of Life

[relief organization] has been a noble exception in care for these and other refugees in Serbia.

There is a significant point to ponder here: how did that operation, still celebrated by various nationalist forces to this day in Croatia, differ in kind or quality from the recent Serb operations dispelling Kosovar Albanians from Kosovo? To be sure, what we know of the 1995 Croat operations does not include the same massacres and systematic slaughter of the male population now coming to light in Kosovo.

We purchased honey and cheese from a roadside stand; the woman had been in exile nearby for five years while the Serbs rebelled. Now Croats and Serbs are returning, although the Serbs in fewer numbers. Yes, there is a Catholic church functioning. No, the Serbs don't have one, but they didn't have one before this last war either. They didn't care about God, she noted. Why would they need a church?

Although I had some trepidation about crossing into Bosnia, due to dire warnings by the car rental company, we sailed smoothly through the border and the next hours through northwest Bosnia. Bihac was a besieged city, held mostly by Muslims with Croat assistance and pounded for months by Serbs. We barely managed to get some money changed; the only valid currency is the "convertible mark," patterned on and pegged to the value of the powerful German DM. Why not? said a merchant. "They own us now. We belong to them."

The waiter at lunch later explained that the whole countryside whose widespread devastation of what we were told had been Serb villages was burned out systematically by the Bihac Army, "after what the Serbs had done to us." A gas station attendant told us that some Serbs are returning now, however. But he also knew that some individuals were being arrested for their war-time misdeeds. "Somebody has to answer for all the terrible things they did to use he declared.

Suddenly near Mrkonjic grad we met a sign, "Welcome to Republika Srpska!" an area that appeared to be largely in good repair. And then soon we were back in the Muslim/ Croat Federation and to Jajce, arriving at the home of Eastern Mennonite Mission volunteer Andrea Birdsall and her colleague in ministry, Vanja Bule (also an

ETS grad). They are part of the leadership for a new congregation emerging with affiliation to the Evangelical Church movement in Bosnia and Hercegovina. We joined them for a prayer meeting that evening at the church. Sunday morning we were invited to speak at the worship service.

We sensed a positive spirit among the team. Vanja's leadership for the gatherings was gifted and dynamic. They expressed much anticipation for the major summer camp efforts. Other leaders were already taking off for those activities. Vanja has experienced some resistance as a woman in leadership, but there is a clear call on her life. Other team members are a couple from Germany and Dalmatia, Dieter and Ljerka Eymann, who graciously hosted us for the Sunday noon meal. He is from a Mennonite congregation in Germany, and they met in volunteer work with Bosnia refugees during the war.

The congregation tries hard to make it safe for all nationalities to work together. The prayers included Serbs and Albanians, all of God's children. Hopes for a peaceful resolution of Kosovo disputes were voiced fervently. A hunger for righteousness is seen across the region. "People are so tired of empty promises and verbal projects."

The entire witness of the Evangelical Church in Bosnia is marked by a hearty combination of word and deed. AGAPE, their humanitarian organization, first finds a warehouse, aid is distributed and often a small community gathers in worship right there. Later some distinction is required, but a vital connection remains.

One of Gerald's former students, Vance from Macedonia, is working in Bihac for AGAPE in a parallel assignment. He was visiting in Jajce, and reported on work with fresh refugees from Kosovo being hosted in Bihac. He had been working earlier in Southern Serbia, and told us of the work and witness of churches there, which we've been following by email. Concern for Serb Christians varied among the folks we visited; this was a strong point.

A visit to a local family brought us an urgent sense of need. A Muslim family living by the fortress in a borrowed horde has no means of support. Gainful employment is almost absolutely unavailable. Jobs go to people with connections,

and in Jajce that means mostly Croats. This family has made a decision to follow Jesus, but many others have done so and then fallen away. Economic prospects are bleak, and they are depending on the food and other aid that comes through AGAPE. Dependency is hazardous to human dignity and we could sense how much a job would mean to their sense of well-being. A Muslim organization had come through a few months earlier, offering loans on very steep terms and threatening jail if the new enterprises they would start should fail to provide repayments. The father in the family estimated that it would take just 1000 DM (\$600 US) to launch a small enterprise that he had pursued in previous times.

Sarajevo, Bosnia

What a delight to arrive back in Sarajevo, twenty years since we first moved there. Destruction has been horrendous, and four years of recovery have not yet erased the scars from many buildings, though Gerald has seen remarkable improvement over the three last years he has been coming. But the hidden traumas brood more heavily over the return to vitality. Shalom is still a vision for the far-sighted: a year of de-mining efforts by Norwegian forces rendered the ancient Hebrew cemetery accessible, but major work is needed yet to restore the graves and markers which lie strewn in frozen agony.

The host and partner for Mennonite contributions to peacebuilding efforts is known as "Inter-religious Service, Face to Face." Founded by the Bosnian Franciscans, it is led by fra.Ivo Markovic. His commitments to peace were forged in the fires of central Bosnia, where war-time atrocities included the loss of his own father and numerous other relatives. Part of that moving account is recorded in our 1993 video, "*Beyond the News: Hope for Bosnia*" (Mennonite Media Ministries). His ministry today intends to revive trust and conversation among the major religious groups, especially Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish and Protestant. Rather than the top levels of hierarchy, he aims to reach ordinary parish priests and many other organizations in civil society.

In the aftermath of war, even the Franciscans are divided between nationalist fervor and the things that make for peace. Some would regard peace efforts as traitorous to the Croatian cause, if such efforts intend the well-being of other nations as well. One person threatened Ivo to his face, not realizing with whom he spoke. For singing a Muslim song in his Franciscan garb, this bitter person wished to spill Ivo's blood on a mass grave in Sarajevo. "I am Ivo Markovic," he answered. A feeble apology followed. It is easy to see how crucial the Franciscans are as a key to maintaining Bosnia as a multi-ethnic society.

A related house, the monastery in Kosovo (Djakovica) had been taken over by Serb military forces, but fra Ivo knew by email that the Franciscans had already returned there, just days after the bombing ended. "This builds trust," he commented with joy, "and confidence for the refugees returning.

Fra Ivo voiced his fervent desire that the Serbian Orthodox Church find ways to bring its own people back to the Gospel, to be centered on Jesus Christ and true faith. In 1996/97, he spent one day each week traveling up the narrow winding road out of Sarajevo to Serb-held territory at Pale, visiting priests and bishops and ordinary Christians. He would remind them of the times together in the past, and the strengths of a multi-ethnic society. They would declare how impossible it is now to live together with Muslims and Croats, and he would report on the life of Serbs who had actually stayed throughout the war in Sarajevo and who are there to this day. Instead of fear, his visits aimed to replace the mistrust with renewed confidence about life together. "This process can actually go very fast," he asserted. Sometimes it only takes a small change in view, and then suddenly things appear altogether different.

"Why did you encourage 150,000 Serbs to leave everything behind in Sarajevo and flee to the hills?" he would ask. "You must have been crazy!"

"Ah, we must have been crazy," they would reply in puzzled tones. Finally the police caught up with him and asked him to stop coming for these apparently innocent visits. "We have analyzed your work," they told him. "We had no idea you were so dangerous!" After that, he only went with foreign guests in tow, and usually mentioned having told their embassies about the visit that day.

The Inter-Religious Service has built some cooperation with Prof. Gajo Sekulič, a political scientist, who is laying plans for a Peace Institute. Its activities would include 1) peace studies, 2) peace research and training, and 3) actual peacemaking. The first would seek to understand the sources of aggression and the needs of groups deprived of their social rights. Fra Ivo mentioned an article he has written, on how to heal post-war traumas through the life of faith.

Osijek, Croatia

Travel to Osijek from Sarajevo was remarkably smooth and uneventful. Formalities at the border were minimal. We were expected at the campus of the Evangelical Theological Seminary, and retired to the quiet guest apartment. Conversations here included the Academic Dean, Damir Spojaric, and Business Manager Antal Balog. Chief librarian and doctoral scholar from Romania Corneliu Constantineanu is directing some new curriculum at the master's level.

We are reminded again of the very strategic role this institution plays in equipping young people for church leadership across the entire region. We are impressed with the competence of the administrative crew at ETS. It is difficult to secure enough expertise in residential teaching staff. The seminary relies heavily on interaction with professors from abroad. It is an exciting crossroads of evangelical cooperation in and around Eastern Europe.

It was comforting also to learn of some recent interaction between believers here in Osijek and those across the tense border in Serbia. When Peter Kuzmic's father-in-law (and Miroslav Volf's father) died earlier this spring, the whole evangelical movement in the region had reason to mourn. But believers in Serbia would have had little possibility of attending the funeral due to travel restrictions and visa regimes between the two territories. Osijek managed to secure permission for an entire busload of church leaders to come through the barriers, and the fellowship though sorrowful was also rich. For many it was the first direct contact in seven years since the outbreak of hostilities.

With Antal Balog, we learned of other related activities that address some of the previous concerns of our journey. Of interest is his significant experience with micro-credit loans for local community development and job creation. He has organized a board with reps from various religious communities, volunteers who set policies for use of grants from abroad. The staff is deliberately diverse, allowing credible contact with populations of great need. Loans range from about \$600 to \$8000 US. He would be quite willing to serve in a consulting role if we find support for such development in Bosnia. Opportunity International has provided \$3.5 million thus far for Croatia, contracted from US AID. PCUSA gave another \$120,000 for the livestock program. Antal is also delighted in the prospect of a new program for alternative civil service in lieu of military training in Croatia. The church is offering to negotiate specific humanitarian assignments in social work connected to church programs, such as soup kitchens, refugee camps, care for invalids and the elderly.

The Balkan region sees many consultants and experts come and go, some of them versed in skills and techniques for dealing with conflict. Initial programs have been launched and carried forward during recent years. But key figures such as Boris Peterlin in Zagreb and Fra Ivo Markovic in Sarajevo voice disappointment when these peace efforts often involve Christians but fail to make Jesus Christ the explicit center of their approach. Serbian Christians in earlier visits have expressed the same concern. The time is ripe for indigenous actors to reclaim the initiative and to reassert the centrality of Christ in the pursuit of peace. It is time to assess and bring together the first fruits for a peace theology in the Balkans.

