

SERB HUMAN RIGHTS IN CROATIA

By Bill Yoder

Dr. Milorad Pupovac is director of the Zagreb-based Serbian Democratic Forum, a human rights lobby dedicated to defending the interests of Serbs living in Croatia. Bill Yoder spoke with him in Zagreb on February 16, 1994.

1. How many Serbs lived in Croatia prior to the present war, and how many are now living in the Croat-controlled parts of Croatia?

Before the war, around 600,000 Serbs lived in Croatia including those in the Krajina area [the region now controlled by Serb forces]. Approximately 450,000 of these lived outside of Krajina. Now, only 100-150,000 remain in these Croat-controlled territories.

2. What are the primary human rights issues in Croatia today?

Preserving the right to live in a flat, retaining places of work, obtaining citizenship, preserving one's confessional or ethnic identity, and political representation. Formally, we are represented by 13 Serbs in the Croatian parliament, but they were all appointed by predominately Croatian parties.

This party, the Serbian National Party, has been subservient to the ruling authority from the beginning of the conflict and was promoted during the conflict as the official voice of the Serbs in Croatia. This party therefore has little in common with the principles of representative democracy.

3. Are you creating a new party?

We are preparing to create a new party. This won't be easy because we need to consult everyone who can influence our activity, especially the Serbs in Krajina. Without their cooperation, there can be no global Serbo-Croatian reconciliation.

4. The Croatian language is being modified. Do you as a Serb accept these changes for yourself?

No, because they are not part of my linguistic or cultural identity. These changes are remote from me and our past common life here in Croatia. But this new language has become a reality. I hope that smart and clever people will realize that

linguistic radicalism is dangerous for the Croatian people, especially if they hope to communicate with their Serbian neighbors.

5. Do you still speak "Serbo-Croatian"?

I don't know which name to use - we are speaking the same language as before. We are ready to respect the will of our Croatian fellows and are willing to be patient as they try and find a linguistic identity. But in turn, we would like them to respect our linguistic attitudes.

6. Metropolitan Jovan, the head of all Croatian Orthodox, has protested against the forced baptism of children as Catholics. A retired Orthodox priest, Jovan Nikolic, says these children stem from mixed marriages and, as the children of atheistic parents, had never been baptized. Are forced baptisms or conversions occurring?

"Forced baptism" is too strong of a term. What has occurred is the result of a general situation which stigmatizes Serbs and the Orthodox as well as the lack of a clear confessional identity among many Serbs and Croats. We had asked the authorities to intervene and assure Serbs that it is not necessary to change one's national or confessional identity. Yet no one from the church or state authorities responded.

The Orthodox church authority did not do everything possible to prevent such processes, so it is co-responsible. It did not call people to stay here and wait for the day when everyone will recognize that we must live together as Orthodox and Catholics. Unfortunately, many people thereupon changed their confessional identities. But no one can say it was forced by a specific priest or church authority. We simply ask the authorities: Why do you tolerate such social transitions? Why do you accept the results of war propaganda?

7. Is a child of Serb parents baptized as a Catholic still a Serb?

Of course. The problem is only that we need to create the climate which allows people a real choice. We don't approve of drastic conditions forcing involuntary decisions upon people. We should all be free to choose differing national, confessional, and linguistic identities. No one should determine that I must be born as a Serb, an

Orthodox or a Catholic. That should be the result of my respect for a tradition, the result of a conscious decision. No one should be able to say: "All Serbs must be Orthodox," or, "All Croats must be Catholics." Why not Protestant or Jewish, or whatever?

8. Do you have any numbers pertaining to the numeric losses for the Orthodox church in Croatia?

That is difficult and dangerous to say. Some changes have a temporal character; social mimicry could change the results tomorrow. People could be returning to their previous identities. Most pupils in schools are learning on basis of Catholic catechism, which could result in a transition to Catholicism. But this is not necessary. A changed global atmosphere could produce very different results.

It is far from my mind to insist on a religious identity as a value in itself; it should be the result of spiritual life. It should be a result of the opening of windows to other people and better communication. We must begin to think of church and confession as elements of stability within a society.

9. Would you agree that similar problems are present in Serbia, especially in the Vojvodina?

Oh yes, I agree completely. Serbia is also a multi-confessional society. That variety needs to be obvious in public opinion and culture, but it isn't happening now. Religious faith is of course a private thing, but everyone has the right to display it publically.

10. In a surprise move, Metropolitan Jovan accepted Croatian citizenship in January. What does this say about present conditions?

Metropolitan Jovan never told me that he did not wish to come back to his country. Be he had listed some preconditions: "I would like my country to be free for all peoples. I would like for my country to be more democratic." Maybe he decided that the time to come was now even though these elements had not been realized and to participate in the creation of these conditions. If he was motivated by this, then his decision was indeed welcome and clever. This should give Serbs living here a new level of self-confidence and identity.

In the church here in Zagreb he said, "I am here to help bring peace and reconciliation to our states and people." If these are his real intentions, then he is very welcome. Many of us wish this step would have been taken earlier, but, as one says in English: "Better late than never."

11. An Orthodox periodical in Germany recently printed a poem about the Vukovar hospital during the 1991 war. One hears here in Croatia that more than 200 patients disappeared from that hospital and are presumed dead. This poem claims the exact opposite: That Serbs had liberated the hospital from fascists. More than once, Serbs have thrust books on the World War II Croatian concentration camp at Jasenovac into my hands. Are foreign Serbs hindering the process of reconciliation?

During this war, victims and tragic historical events have been misused with abandon. That poem about Vukovar's hospital is complete nonsense. Unfortunately, many people within the churches have been willing to forget Christian principles. The churches' top leadership should be criticizing the propagandistic way some priests recall historical tragedies. If I understand Christianity well, many of these developments are completely against its principles. The churches are not here to produce hate--they are here to create bridges. Churches are here to clarify, not to foster uncertainty and hatred. Some priests and churches have forgotten elementary principles of the Bible.

There are so many profane elements within the present process of Rechristianization. So many elements are foreign to basic principles of the churches. The process of Christianization is being realized only on the surface.

We observe the strange phenomena that those who were yesterday the strongest enemies of the churches are now the strongest fighters for Catholicism or Orthodoxy. That should concern responsible people. Christianity is being used for self-absolution. It's a means for whitewashing one's own spotty past. I myself would like to be part of a church, but these developments are keeping me at a distance.