

Breaking Barriers in the Balkans



Croatia 2007

The clouds were tear-filled as I looked up at the heavens.
I was strolling on the banks of the Drava River.
The day was peaceful and quiet,
It was the Sabbath in the Croatian town of Osijek,
The community was giving the day to God.

As I gazed into their faces and saw their prevalent sadness,
Their pain described the injustice of the war back in 1991.
A war that left a God loving community riddled
with remnants of bullet holes and bombshells.
A war, that shook their souls for three long years.

Bob Crum

March 19th I took my place inside a new seminary facility in Osijek, Croatia and looked out over twenty-five third and fourth-year students. It was an idyllic dream for me to think about having two full weeks to teach future pastors and leaders in Eastern Europe the texts I love the

most, David's Psalms, especially since the school sat directly opposite a former synagogue. Yet I had no idea of the painstaking work that lay ahead. Many of the buildings in the city of Osijek are still blanketed with bullet holes, a painful reminder of the recent war. The students at the seminary were the products of decades of distrust and hatred between the countries they represented – Macedonia, Albania, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia. Some did not trust Americans, others seemed isolated or lonely, and a few disillusioned. The faculty had sacrificed much to serve in this war torn country and it was difficult for me to comprehend all the responsibilities they had to carry. How could we hope to make an impact on this community in a mere two weeks? It was like trying to plant a vineyard in a field laden with centuries of rubble.

But we had a great team with Bob Crum, Ken Coleman & Sang Nguyen from pbcc, and Iuliana Mihai and Ligia Macelaru, 4th year students from Romania, served us with premier hospitality and uncanny wisdom. We decided to break through the barriers with love and grace. We started by canceling one of the afternoon sessions and substituted two movie nights, followed by some humorous skits. While I rested after lectures, the rest of the team took students out for coffee to listen to their stories. At night we would take one or two out to dinner and enjoyed communion with them to remind them how precious they were before God. The second week we "kidnapped" four of the couples and sent them off to a nice hotel for a romantic overnight stay (they never had a honeymoon). By the end of





the second week the question still remained: Would they actually give voice to their souls in their personal psalm they were supposed to write? Several objected that if they had to write an honest poem, they did not want to share it publicly with the group because they didn't feel safe. Then that dreaded night arrived. We gathered in the Mennonite Room at 8 o'clock. After a prolonged silence we began to hear the "authentic voice" of these dear students. Much of their pain centered on the recent war:

*"It was 1991 when the war began.
I was five years old...."*

Out it came: pent up pain, torrid confusion and secluded suffering all couched in tender vulnerability and risky honesty. I'll never forget Balženka. After Serbian bombs destroyed her house, she was forced to take refuge with her family in a dark, miserable basement for the duration of the war. As she tells her story...

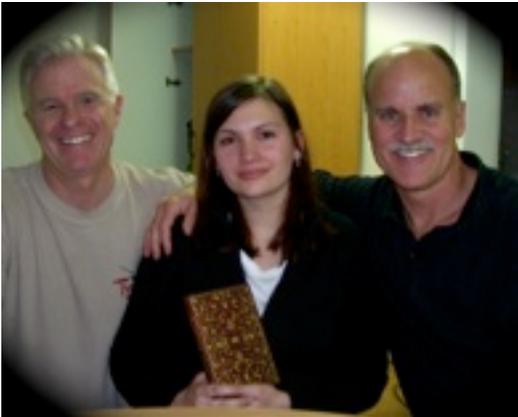
For three years there was no food, no warmth and no ability to wash. Suddenly, one day all the shooting stopped. Relief flooded our hearts. But the wonderful silence was broken by the raucous voices of soldiers invading what remained of our house. They ordered us out of the basement, lined us up against the wall and said they were going to shoot us because we had not fought with them in the war. I closed my eyes waiting to die. Was it all going to end this way? But as I stood there a voice rang out, "Don't shoot! I worked with them before the war. They did fight." It was a lie, but this man, like Jesus, risked his life to identify with us in order to save us. When we looked around our accusers left and hot tears streamed down my filthy face. After a few minutes, we peeled ourselves off from the wall. So thankful to Jesus, we were free.

I began my new life. It was like spring. I met a handsome young officer, fell in love, got married and had a little girl. But it was not long before I realized I knew very little about my husband. Then the internal war started. I discovered that he already had a wife and children in another town and several other girlfriends. I fled to my parents' home with my daughter where I felt safe, but my husband begged me to return. After I refused again and again, he entered my parents' home, pulled a bomb out of his pocket and through it into the middle of the room. I found myself staring at death once more.

Rescue came again, but at a price. My father threw himself on the bomb; his body became our protective shield. He lost both his legs, but he saved my life and the life of my little girl. He now lives in a wheel chair full of pain, but his spirit is full of joy because his daughter and granddaughter were saved from destruction, and I became my father's legs taking him wherever he needed to go. My father's love reminds me of the greatest love this world has ever known. Jesus Christ threw himself on my sin, and now I am his legs, hands and mouth telling everyone of his love.



Another student, Andrea, explained that she was six years old when the war in Croatia started, and that she and her sister used to hide under the kitchen table when the Serbian bombs fell. When the shop across the street was bombed, she fled with her parents to Switzerland. Afterwards a bomb landed right in their kitchen, destroying her home. Having been spared from one threat, she walked right into another in the very place she sought refuge, Switzerland. Every day at school she was subjected to verbal abuse from the children for being a foreigner. They called her “a bomb, a pregnant woman, fat, a freak, a miscarriage, a retard,” and so on. Increasing her trauma, a new teacher arrived and took the lead in humiliating her each day as a stupid foreigner.



The only way Andrea could cope with this seven-year torture was to stop eating. For two months she refused to eat, and her weight dropped to about 90 pounds. But when the sight of her frail body broke her mother’s heart, Andrea found a friend, Jesus Christ, whom she described as “more valuable than all humankind together.” “He was my only friend through the hard times, and made me understand how important it is to have love and compassion for other people...since then, I cherish every person in my life...for life isn’t worth living if you are not able to love others.”

I must say as a foreigner teaching in a strange land, I felt so welcome and embraced by Andrea as she represented the class to express their appreciation on the last day of the course. It was only after I heard her story and poem that I began to realize where her compassion came from. She had indeed fulfilled Paul’s exhortation to the church in Ephesus –

Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (Eph 2:12-13)



Then there was Aleksandar, whose younger brother was one of the best climbers in Macedonia and training to represent his country on Everest. He and three of his fellow climbers were killed in an avalanche. He couldn’t pronounce his brother’s name until he gave it to his son at his birth.

Predrag

Predrag,
is just a noun,
means nothing to you, but for me
this is “too precious,” “too dear” a name.

Predrag is the name, which means
too precious or too dear.
This is the name given to my brother on his birth;
this is the name written on his grave.

This is the name of my son,
Predrag, is too precious, too dear to me.



David also spoke of the tragic affects of the war and how it robbed him of his identity.

As small boy I was terrified of the sounds of bombs and air-planes that were flew above our village. My parents carry me in their hands to take refuge in the basement. Finally Serbs occupied our village. They destroyed our homes and forced us to leave. This was terrible period because we didn't have our home and we had to migrate from one place to another. We learned to trust in God's providence and his provision for our lives. For me as young boy it was specially hard period because I was forced to change my environment very often. Also, in same time, I had to explain to my new friends why I was not a Catholic. It made me feel as if I didn't belong. In other word when ever I change place of living I must to improve my self, and I must to find my identity.

After several more hours of similar stories and poems, we partook in Holy Communion as a new community. As Balženka held the cup of the New Covenant in her hands, she said that with Jesus in her heart, she felt like she was finally at the place where she could forgive her husband. As she served me the cup, I think I came a bit closer to feeling those hot tears of the Son when they peeled him off the tree.

In awe of His goodness,
Brian Morgan



Poetry Night

A night that will forever be indelibly marked on my heart.
Thirty something spiritual descendants of King David
Cautiously, slowly entered the Cave of Adullam
Ah yes, metaphore'
A night that started in the cold silence of uncertainty
A night of vulnerability, exposure, and displayed pain
Will it last? Only You know Lord?
But my life will be forever changed
My heart enlarged to love
Me devotion to you O Lord more humble
For a gift of a new nation, a new family you bestowed upon me.
I am eternally grateful. Amen, Amen
Ah yes, East of Eden.

Bob Crum

