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BOSNIAN ELECTIONS

by Reid Westrem

Reid Westrem is teaching English in Plzen, Czech Republic, as an American Peace Corps volunteer. He and his wife Robyn were observers of the election process in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the middle of September 1996 and used the opportunity to inquire about the religious situation.

As our aging red "Yugo" lurched up the narrow, rocky path leading through the hillside village of Koritnik in central Bosnia, my wife, Robyn, and I gawked at the sights that passed by: Babel-sized haystacks; tethered goats entangling themselves in their own fury; a group of laughing, toothless women in headscarves and broad skirts gathered around a wood fire, taking turns pulling a blackened oar through a bubbling cauldron of plum jam; old men dressed alike in beret, vest and jacket, chatting and smoking outside a mosque; weary horses towing whole families in wooden carts; an old woman in multicolored woollen stockings leading a lone sheep on a leash.

The Bosnians were preparing to vote in their first national elections since 1991, and we were there as representatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Our purpose that evening was to observe a political rally, and we were a bit late. But it didn't matter. When we arrived, the crowd of about 40 was still milling around wondering who had the key to the meeting hall. Finally, as the sun set in his face, one of the candidates stepped abruptly into the road and began to speak, perhaps fearing that his audience might drift away to their evening chores. But no sooner had he begun when the clunk-clunk of a heavy bell sounded the arrival up the road of a mother cow and her calf. Obstinate, they plodded through the crowd, groaning with annoyance at the obstruction, impatiently exiting the scene like ladies clutching purses on their way to a much more important engagement. Their handler followed impassively. The speaker resumed but gained little momentum before "clink, clink, clink" lighter bells rang and a herd of sheep trotted through like a football team taking the field. Next came their shepherd dragging a twenty-foot tree limb on a rope. Clearly baffled, he asked a group of boys what was happening, and when they unfurled a campaign poster, he merely blinked and shrugged. Somehow the intense public enthusiasm of these elections hadn't reached his pasture. He left the amused onlookers and cheerfully followed his flock. Three more times the bells sounded, freezing the speaker with mouth open and finger raised while herds of sheep rambled through. It was an utterly charming--and entirely unexpected--glimpse of life in Bosnia.

But our visit to another village is needed to complete the picture. North of Sarajevo a pot-holed highway twists and climbs through lush mountains to the idled iron-mining town of Vares. From here one bright afternoon, we walked up a steep, muddy road lined with majestic pines toward a vision of green sloping fields filled with golden haystacks. The air was fresh, cool and moist. It was idyllic. The scene changed drastically, however, when we reached the hillcrest, where the ash and rubble remains of Stupni Do lay scattered among overgrown weeds. On the night of October 23, 1993, Bosnian Croat soldiers clearing out of Vares stormed through this Muslim village, systematically detonating or setting fire to each house along the way. Dozens of villagers, including women, children and the elderly, were shot or butchered with knives trying to run away; others burned in their homes; some managed to escape. Today in Stupni Do there are no jam-makings, no speeches, no trotting sheep--only toppled foundations, charred timbers, refrigerators and washing machines burnt black, red-rusted hulks of cars. It is a village in place, but lost. Even more haunting to me than the bone fragments in the road was the sound, resonating throughout the area, of a bucket filling with water. At first I thought someone was gathering drinking water from a well--loggers and residents from surviving villages still use the road. I listened to the bucket fill for a very long time, an impossibly long time. Then I approached the sound, coming cautiously around a bend. As I came closer I realized with a chill that no one was there, that a metal bucket sat abandoned beneath a faucet from which cold mountain water surged blindly, filling and filling and filling the bucket. Water poured and pounded into the eternally filling and overflowing bucket. For me, the deep gurgle and splash of Stupni Do is unforgettable. It is its own memorial.

The villagers are the biggest victims in this war, says Mustafa Jahic, director of the Gazi Husrev-Bey Library in Sarajevo. Jahic, who himself survived the four-year siege of the Bosnian capital and managed to keep his library's valuable collection of Islamic manuscripts intact by shuttling them in cars from house to house, describes Bosnia as a top-down society in which villagers are especially vulnerable to manipulation by political leaders--even

to the point of taking up arms--against their neighbors, as official propaganda goaded them to do. Now, with villages overrun and families uprooted, they're searching for answers: Why did this happen? Why aren't there jobs? Why can't we go home? "The problem is in Zagreb and Belgrade," Jahic says. "When they understand and feel that they cannot pull Bosnia apart, there will be the beginning of peace. But today they still think they can do it."

It is generally agreed among Sarajevo's religious leaders that the key to stifling the ambitions of the various political leaders in the former Yugoslavia is showing them that they are not the ultimate kings of the hill in the top-down equation: the international community stands above them and can exert irrepressible pressure when it musters the will. Meanwhile, these leaders point out, true healing must develop at the grassroots level.

The most visible international involvement in Bosnia recently has surrounded the national elections of September 14. My wife and I, frustrated by years of readings the headlines and feeling helpless--even wrote the headlines as a newspaper editor in 1991--were excited to be offered positions as electoral supervisors with OSCE. But soon we wondered whether we were doing the right thing: were we willing participants, as the media put it, in the legal partitioning of Bosnia? We talked about this with the Bosnians we met. In early September, Sarajevo's old-town market was bustling, but the bustle was deceiving and somewhat surreal. With only a handful of flights arriving daily at Sarajevo's recently reopened airport, the shoppers were almost exclusively international aid workers wearing ID badges and IFOR troops toting enormous weapons. At the market we met two students attending Sarajevo University. We asked them if this was the proper time for elections, or if it was too early, as many editorialists has declared. They lowered their heads and smiled patiently at our naivete. "It's too late," one said. Out of politeness, perhaps, they concealed the frustration, bitterness and disappointment most Bosnians feel toward the West. "The hand of the aggressor should have been stalled four years ago," says Dr. Mato Zovkic, vicar general of the diocese of Greater Sarajevo. "The original sin of our troubles," Zovkic explains, "was not only Serb aggression, but also big brothers like the United States who were sitting and watching it all." Likewise, he laments that American Catholics were misinformed throughout the early part of the war, getting their information from the Serb-dominated Yugoslav embassy in Washington, while regular communications links with Sarajevo were cut off. The break came as late as 1994, when Bosnia's Cardinal Vinko Puljic and U.S. bishops exchanged visits. Since then, U.S. bishops have helped establish the Council of Bishops of Bosnia and Herzegovina and reconstruct church buildings. Western congregations can continue to help, Zovkic insists, by keeping Bosnia in the public eye, by battling news fatigue and resisting the temptation to set Bosnia aside in favor of fresher and more exciting reading material, and by demanding that their leaders do the same. Bosnia's problems, he explains, remain urgent insofar as they are the modern world's problems--the problems of different groups of people struggling to live together. "Bosnia should not just be a passing interest of the U.S. government," he says. "We are afraid of what will happen after the [U.S.] elections in November. Is Bosnia only a part of [Bill Clinton's] presidential campaign, or is it a longer-term interest?"

When asked for their opinion of the Dayton agreement, religious leaders in Sarajevo offer variations of a single theme: the worst peace is better than the best war. "The Dayton agreement sanctioned the fruits of aggression, but it stopped the killing," says Zovkic. Creating a just peace may be as difficult as ending the war itself, he say, because "when we talk about 'just peace' we don't mean the same thing." Bosnian Serbs, for example, want control of Serb-settled land, and some long for unification with Serbia proper in order to realize what some call the mythos of Greater Serbia. Counter to this would be the mythos of Greater Croatia, an idea which appeals to many Bosnian Croats in Herzegovina and western Bosnia. Muslims, the largest group, want to rule with the mandate and power that their numbers give them, while Croats around Sarajevo, integrationists historically, want 'equal rights' which is to say they fear Muslim domination. Talk of secession thus further undermines a state divided from the outset into two entities, the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the latter being an alliance of Croats and Muslims. If the Serbs leave, can at least the Croat-Muslim entity survive intact?

"I'm not sure that the Federation will stay together," says Jakob Finci, president of the Jewish Community in the Federation. "It's hard to believe you'll have a happy marriage that starts with rape." Finci, an acute analyst of the situation and a refreshingly blunt personality, calls the elections "a political game," yet maintains that the establishment of the democratic process in Bosnia is crucial to long-term stability. in the short run, the question of who wins the September 14 elections is less important that the question of how the losers respond: will they accept the results or will they grab their toys and go home?

The primary issue, however, is maintaining the peace, and religious leaders firmly insist that to do this, IFOR, the NATO-led Implementation Force, must remain in Bosnia beyond December, when its mandate expires.

Without strong international military presence, Finci fears disaster. As for sorting out issues of justice, Finci suggests that something like South Africa's "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" may have to be established in Bosnia.

"We can't live again like we used to," Finci says. Yet a segregated Bosnia, he explains, would not be Bosnia at all. Bosnia, he says, is like a loaf of bread with its inseparable mixture of water, flour and yeast. "And perhaps the Jews," he adds with a grin, "are the salt!" Despite their numbers Jews have contributed much more than seasoning to Bosnia's history. The first wave of Jewish settlement in the area came when Sephardic Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492. Arriving in a backward and isolated land, Finci says, "they opened connections with the Jewish world to develop commerce . . . you know, they didn't have Internet then!" Soon after, Sarajevo rose to prominence as a commercial center. Jews also blended their own culture and heritage into the Bosnian stew, bringing with them, most notably, the "Sarajevo Haggadah," a now-famous 14th-century illuminated manuscript. A second wave of Jewish immigration, Ashkenazis moving south through the expanding Austro-Hungarian territories, took a leading role in Bosnia's industrial development. Today Jews occupy a unique position in Bosnian society. As the only group without territorial or power claims, and the only one that has maintained good relationships with all the other, they alone are qualified to serve as locally based mediators. "We're trying to play the role of honest brokers between warring parties," Finci says. They are also fellow sufferers. "During this war," Finci points out, "Jews were victims not as Jews but as citizens of Sarajevo." In responding to this suffering, the Jews have set a valiant example, neither turning inward and erecting walls nor launching attacks and accusations. Rather, the 600 Jews of Sarajevo have reached out, through the soup kitchens, pharmacies and other services of "La Benevolencija," their cultural, educational and humanitarian society, to serve more than 10,000 people in the city. Finci, who is also president of "La Benevolencija" (as well as co-coordinator of Zayedno, or "Together," a group that fosters interreligious cooperation), says this outreach program allows community members with a purely secular orientation to contribute their efforts. But, to an outside observer, it does more than that; at a time in Bosnia when many are striving to link specific religious orientations with exclusivity and nationalist aspirations, it redefines for everyone the idea of religious community as collective service of people in need.

Whatever political and military leaders do in Bosnia, there is one problem they can't touch. This is the damage done to human hearts. For religious leaders, healing these wounds will be their prime responsibility and greatest challenge. Furthermore, it may be their best opportunity to touch the lives of people driven to secularism under decades of communist rule. But before any healing will be possible, notes Mato Zovkic, the vicar general, Bosnian society must be dislodged from its current stage of mutual accusations, in which all sides tabulate the number of churches or mosques destroyed, community members killed and families driven into exile, all in order to demonstrate that their suffering has been worse than anyone else's. The next stage, he suggests, is for each religious community to speak to its own members. "We should try to re-educate ourselves as persons, as citizens," he says. "We should stop deepening our mistrust, suspicion and hatred. We should stop poisoning our relationships." He cites the case of a priest in Travnik, the victim of what might be called spiritual atrocities. In addition to other brutalities, he was told to spit on the cross and step on the rosary. "This priest," Zovkic explains, "for the rest of his life, may be poisoned. but I told him: do not make your personal tragedy rule for all of us!" And beyond the quarantine of poisonous beliefs, there is something more: forgiveness.

The urgency of teaching and preaching forgiveness must not be overlooked, warns Stjepan Duvnjak, guardian of the Franciscan monastery at Kraljeva Sutjeska in central Bosnia. The lesson in history is clear: following the atrocities of World War II, no one spoke of forgiveness in Yugoslavia. Instead, tensions between Serbs and Croats were allowed to build over the years until, Duvnjak believes, they boiled over in this war.

Today there is a tremendous yearning for normalcy in Bosnia. Several people told us, "We just need to get back to work, to get on with life, to get our minds off our problems." To be sure, they are right; but this time forgiveness, however difficult, must not be avoided. Of course, where there are victims there are also perpetrators of crimes, and in Bosnia each faction is guilty of atrocities both large and small. Therefore each religious community must address the fundamental issues of confession, atonement, repentance. But of these things one hears nothing today, not even a whisper. For one thing, cries of victimization and demands for justice drown out other voices, but one suspects that something deeper is involved. It is possible that Bosnia is not yet ready to confront its own crimes, that its people are collectively going through the stages of bereavement and are now in the stage of denial. For example, after we spoke with the vicar general, our Muslim translator, along for the day but not needed for the interview, told us that she felt encouraged by his words and thought he was a fair and honest man. But, she added, "I

don't believe his story about the priest in Travnik. It is impossible!" The accused, in this case, are Muslim. There is one more reason for the total lack of public confession. At the moment, everyone agrees, any confession by one group would be pounced upon by members of the other groups, and instead of encouraging a series of cathartic, unilateral confessions, a fresh round of accusations would be fired: "See! We told you they are criminals! Now they admit it!" Now more than ever, the exercise of private confession, between sinner and religious leader or between sinner and God, should be encouraged and enacted. For now, religious leaders admit rather uncomfortably, public dialogue should be directed elsewhere. Another difficult problem faces religious leaders in Bosnia: how can various groups be reconciled with each other? Some Bosnians may feel that peace is enough; reconciliation may be asking too much. But Finci, of the Jewish community, has more confidence. "Good will is the only necessary thing," he says. "All the rest is strategy." The prime strategy, everyone agrees, is simply to talk to one another. But a permanent forum for dialogue does not yet exist. There is no shortage of short-term help from the West, with conferences and visits by individuals and groups occurring regularly. The problem is that everyone has their own methods and agendas, and when added together it all becomes uncoordinated and confusing, according to Ed Joseph, director-general of OSCE's democratization unit in Sarajevo, which maintains contact with the religious communities in Bosnia. Joseph is willing to provide a long-term forum for discussion under the OSCE banner, but he believes someone "with a vision" and with expertise in comparative religion would be needed to direct the dialogue. Additionally Leonard Swidler of Temple University and Paul Mojzes of Rosemont College, along with the Sarajevo-based group "Zayedno," have led a drive to create a Department of Interreligious Dialogue at Sarajevo University, but additional funding for the project is needed. Although everyone agrees that dialogue is essential for reconciliation, the choice of a suitable subject for discussion has been problematic. Recently, for example, top-level talks were proposed between Muslim and Orthodox leaders, but the effort broke down when Mustafa Cerić, the Reis-ul-ulema, the supreme Muslim authority in Bosnia, demanded that issues of truth and justice be included in the discussion. "That won't bring the Orthodox to the table," says Joseph. As with the idea of a 'just peace,' each group has its own version of truth and justice." Borrowing the motto of an independent group called Search for Common Ground, Joseph suggests that the guiding principle for interreligious dialogue in Bosnia should be: "Understand the differences. Act on the commonalities." Bosnia's religious leaders should approach each other as men of God, he believes. They should begin reconciliation from a theological rather than a political perspective. "Why not talk about God?" Joseph asks. If the discussion was kept positive and cooperative, perhaps a wider exploration of issues would develop. It might even lead, in time, to a balanced discussion of truth and justice. Dusan Jovanovic, the only Orthodox priest currently working in Sarajevo, brushes aside the idea of discussing theology with his counterparts. "We do not have time for this now," he explains. Before the war, one bishop and seven priests served a Serb population of about 70,000, but now, by Jovanovic's estimate, only 3,000 to 4,000 Serbs remain. Most left last spring just before control over their neighborhoods was transferred to the Muslim-led government. Jovanovic believes that interreligious dialogue should begin by focusing on more pressing common needs, such as humanitarian assistance. The need for reconstruction aid is especially acute for the Serbs, not only in Sarajevo but throughout the Republika Srpska. Serbs were not the biggest victims; they simply have the least access to outside help, Jovanovic claims. Catholics, he says, can appeal for assistance to the Vatican and to Catholic churches in prosperous Western countries, while Muslims have the backing of wealthy Arab nations. But wherever the Serbs look, with the exception of Greece, they find Orthodox churches in economically drained post-communist lands. Nonetheless, Jovanovic identifies material needs as a common concern and sees this issue, not theology or "truth and justice," as the best unifying subject for interreligious dialogue and communal labor: "We need to rebuild our houses together."

Which village provides a truer glimpse into the future of Bosnia: Koritnik, with its cheerful, homespun political rally, or Stupni Do, the charred ghost town with an eternally filling water bucket? There is certainly cause for despair in Bosnia today, but there is also cause for hope, and it can be found in the search for common ground: everyone is hurting (the war reached into every corner of the land), and everyone needs healing. People on all sides need to be 're-educated' to learn to live with one another again in tolerance. "This will take years, but it is possible," says Zovkic. "And it is our duty, our responsibility. . . . We cannot choose where we are born. I believe it is God who wants me to stay here with people who are different."

On each side there are victims who need to forgive and perpetrators who need to confess their sins and seek atonement. This is not merely therapy, but a commandment of all the religious traditions in Bosnia. "Religious leaders have to tell this to their followers," says Jahić, of the Gazi Husrev-Bey Library. "If the people live as their religion teaches, we will have peace in Bosnia."