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PROTESTANTS IN (FORMER) YUGOSLAVIA

By Bill Yoder

Dr. Bill Yoder is a free-lance writer who recently received his doctorate from the Free University in Berlin in 1991 and frequently travels to Eastern Europe. He visited Serbia and Croatia in September 1992. He is a frequent contributor.

The tiny Protestant churches of Slovenia and Croatia are thriving. Though the front is only three miles away, the Pentecostal seminary in Osijek has reopened and is hosting students from a dozen East European countries. Residents of Osijek point with pride to the fact that, after nightly attacks, their streets were usually cleared of glass by 10 a.m. The instinctive Croatian drive to construct one's own house never was brought to a halt by the war. Thanks to a UN-bartered truce, the city has remained calm since May 1992.

Stories of human grandeur abound in Osijek, where 18,000 living quarters were damaged or destroyed. The recent Lutheran pastor in Osijek, Mati Korpiahu of Finland, was known for his refusal to halt repairs on the exterior of the parsonage during air alarms. The adjacent church suffered major shelling damage, but the parsonage he restored himself with so much devotion has remained untouched.

Emmanuel Gitlin, a Lutheran theology professor from Hickory, North Carolina, and his wife, Helen, returned to the Pentecostal institution in Osijek from the U.S. in July, 1991 during the height of the attacks. Helen explains simply: "We thought that if the students should be there, then we should be there, too." The Gitlins presently reside in Zagreb.

Korpiahu's successor, Jakov Mrcela, is pastor in both Osijek and in Slavonski Brod, which is still shelled daily by Serb forces. Though many of his parishioners have fled, Mrcela rejects out of hand the thought of an eventual departure, emphasizing that "the shepherd does not abandon his flock." As with virtually all Croatians, this young pastor is also a patriot: He desires that his people receive both "more love" as well as "more weapons." A large Croatian coat of arms stares down upon visitors to Mrcela's study.

Croatian Protestants express no remorse over the passing of Yugoslavia. They cite the appearance of freedom of religion and democracy as being of greater importance. Prior to the international recognition of the Croatian state, local Protestant relief agencies churches were primary agencies for relief aid from the West, moving Protestants into the public

limelight for the first time in history. Peter MacKenzie, a Baptist missionary from England and a long-time resident of Zagreb, concludes: "We are no longer marginalized; we now have more freedom to evangelize than do our equivalents in Great Britain. We are no longer forbidden to do humanitarian work. This new exposure is revitalizing the church."

In the parched and wilted Serbian province of Vojvodina, perspectives are radically different. Protestants there tend to divide the guilt between Serbs and Croats equally. The erection of new political borders and the dissolution of life-long friendships have cut deeply. The Serb spouse of a Baptist pastor in Novi Sad, both of whom once lived 50 miles away in Osijek, exclaims: "How can these people be happy about what has happened? How can one, in view of the horrible human costs, applaud the breakup of Yugoslavia?"

Zelimir Srnec, the Croatian director of the Baptist seminary in Novi Sad, states: "We feel abandoned by the churches of the West. What else should we conclude when we receive only a tiny fraction of the relief aid designated for all of Yugoslavia? Compared to the aid for Croatia, the help we receive is only a drop in the bucket."

Serb church support for Western economic sanctions is non-existent. Rev. Andrej Beredi, Bishop of the Slovak Lutheran Church based in Novi Sad, laments: "We are unable to import children's literature from Slovakia at present! Not even Bibles can be legally imported." In September, Baptists requested refunds for tickets to attend a Billy Graham conference in Amsterdam: Holland had refused to grant them entry visas. Bishop Beredi adds: "Citizens are only allotted 20 liters of gasoline per month, but even that amount is often not available. I don't know how we are going to pay for heating oil this winter, but then, there may not be any on the market anyway." Annual inflation in Serbia is now measured in four digits.

Bank money transfers are impossible, so hard cash must be funneled into Serbia by couriers from Hungary. Sanctions have transformed travelers into living piggy banks, making Serbia-bound passenger trains in southern Hungary the frequent targets of organized bandits. Recent victims include Ludmila Beredi, a daughter of the Bishop.

The war-evading, political objectives of sanctions are not appreciated. Martin Hovan, Superintendent of ex-Yugoslavia's 2,500 Methodists and an ethnic Slovak, concludes: "These sanctions will most definitely be counterproductive. Serbs are deeply committed to the defense of their country and sanctions will only heighten their resolve to defy the West."

Could Yugoslav Lutherans play a peacemaking role? The vast majority of Yugoslav Lutherans are neither Serbs nor Croats, but rather Slovaks or Slovenes. Yet the three Lutheran denominations remain ethnic churches and are without the ethnic diversity of the Baptists or Pentecostals. Some mediating efforts have appeared unexpectedly: All five Orthodox priests have fled from Osijek. Consequently, Protestants there are on occasion pressed into duty to counsel or bury members of the Serbian Orthodox faith. Though the Slovak Lutheran church of Serbia has 51,000 members, making it the largest Protestant

church in all of Yugoslavia, and the Slovene church boasts 19,000 members, Lutheran objectives remain modest. The 3,000 Baptists of Croatia and Serbia are involved in six national relief agencies. Lutherans have only one, based in the Zagreb headquarters of the 5,000-member Croatian church. Bishop Beredi explains: "I am fearful that the Orthodox will accuse us of proselytization if we develop an active relief program." Beredi reports that approximately fifteen Lutherans have died in combat for the Serb army. The Belgrade Baptist pastor, Alexander Birvis concludes: "I do not believe that Slovak Lutherans have been sufficiently informed of pacifist options at their disposal for draft-age men."