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TRAVEL REPORTS FROM FORMER YUGOSLAVIA 1995

by Bill Yoder

Dr. Bill Yoder (Mennonite) is a member of the Board of Advisory Editors of REE. He is currently a media spokesperson for the Baptist churches of Berlin, Germany. The material below were several somewhat overlapping articles based on his travel in the former Yugoslavia.

Some Yugoslav Evangelicals Thriving

British charismatics are in evidence among the rubble of Muslim East Mostar. There they are organizing a sports program for games against teams in Croat-held West Mostar. A standing joke claims that "Only volleyball would work." This sport would allow one team to remain strictly on Croatian, the other, strictly on Muslim soil.

Though clearly loyal to their own governments, the evangelicals of ex-Yugoslavia present a unique witness: their congregations are profoundly multi-ethnic. One evangelical leader in Croatia points out that mixed marriages involving a Muslim party seem most open to conversion: "Such couples are searching for security. They no longer have the Yugoslav nationality as an option."

"Every church in Croatia is too small to accept all those who are coming," beams Branco Lovrec, president of the Baptist Union in Croatia. Having baptized 300 during the past two years, Croatian Baptists now total 1,600 members. Emigration, not war, has thinned their ranks in recent times.

A Pentecostal church in West Mostar is thriving. Attendance in two tiny rooms averages 200; yet only three of its members stem from the previous, destroyed church center in East Mostar. A small Baptist congregation is again active in Sarajevo as well as a Pentecostal one in Tuzla. Evangelicals are also expanding their ranks in Serbia: A Pentecostal congregation of 250 members led by Aleksandar Mitrović plans to move into Novi Sad's imposing Jewish synagogue this summer.

Though relations between the evangelicals of Serbia and Croatia remain deeply troubled, ties between evangelical bodies on the same side of the war frontier have improved markedly: Baptists and Pentecostals are cooperating on church-planting and relief projects.
The volume of emergency humanitarian aid has dropped dramatically. The Baptist "Duhovna Stvarnost" agency in Croatia only sent 70 tons of food to Bosnia in 1994, down 930 tons from the previous year. Nevertheless, positive repercussions remain: Baptists were among the invited guests during the Pope’s historic address in Zagreb last September. "The Catholics have accepted us as a church, not as a sect," concludes Lovrec. "This proves that our steps have been wise." Lovrec' rejection of the sectarian past alarms traditionalist evangelicals who continue to regard the papal office as an expression of the Antichrist.

The evangelicals remain far less than equals to the preponderant Catholic Church. Though evangelical religion classes have received state accreditation, appeals for access to state-controlled media remain unanswered.

The advances of evangelicals in Western-oriented Croatia are matched by setbacks in Serb-held territories. Nationalist Orthodox bishops such as Atanasije Jeftiće of Mostar and Amfilohije Radović of Montenegro have publically allied themselves with extremist paramilitary forces and are castigating the Protestant West.

Last June the official Orthodox paper, Pravoslavlje [Orthodoxy], printed Atanasije’s attack on the mayor of Trebinje in Serb-held Bosnia, accusing him of "acting like a democrat" and tolerating the "soul-killing propaganda" of local Adventists. The Bishop, in exile near Mostar, pointed out that the Adventists, "like everything devilish," come from America. Another article placed evangelical groups in the vicinity of Satanist ones. An acrimonious exchange in the magazine Nin between Atanasije and Professor Aleksandar Birvić, a Baptist pastor in Belgrade, followed.

Vojska, the military magazine, later propounded the theory that only a monolithic Serbian and Orthodox nation could be strong; foreign pluralistic influences divide and undermine the fighting will of the Serbian people. A Christmas letter signed by the Orthodox Patriarch Pavle and his bishops warned strongly against Western influences. Evangelical opportunities to respond are minimal: A protest letter by the Baptists remains unpublished.

Radical Orthodox clergy prefer Radovan Karadžić, leader of the "Serbian Republic" of Bosnia. While church rights in Serbia remain unclarified, the new Bosnian Serb constitution defines the Orthodox church as the state church and concedes major privileges regarding holidays, education, and the military. Bishop Atanasije along with other Orthodox bishops has called for the overthrow the atheist and ex-Communist Slobodan Milošević, president of the rump Yugoslav state. According to Orthodox reports, Milošević did not exempt even church candles from the present sanctions against the Bosnian Serb state. Generals of the once-'godless' Yugoslav army are attacked by clergy for having failed to produce a decisive victory at the outset of the war.

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Evangelicals for their part mostly prefer President Milošević. The Pentecostal Aleksandar Mitrović concludes: "Milošević is good for us. He's against the war, has rejected [a liberalization of] abortion, and doesn't want to share his power with the Orthodox."

Jasmina Tošić of the evangelical relief agency "Hleb Zivota" [Bread of Life] claims: "Persecution is coming and it will grow." Yet Pastor Birviš remains more optimistic: "Persecution is a real possibility only if groups such as the Serbian Renewal Movement [Srbski Pokret Obnove] come into power."

The most significant divide runs through the middle of the Serbian Orthodox Church, not between the Orthodox and evangelicals. An Orthodox theologian in Belgrade mentions that Vasilije, bishop of Bijeljina in Serb-held Bosnia, has never condemned the destruction of mosques in his city. "The two of us are not in the same church," the theologian concludes. Orthodox Bishop Lavrentije of Šabac, Serbia was labeled a "Judas" in the press for serving as president of the interdenominational Yugoslav Bible Society.

Professor Milorad Pupovac, head of a Serbian political party in Croatia, suggested to Christianity Today ways to forge Protestant-Orthodox trust: "Help liberate people from the profane misuse of religion; invite the Orthodox to participate in international institutions; engage in programs of reconstruction in war-torn [Serbian] areas." A portion of the funding for the new Orthodox seminary in Belgrade stems from foreign church bodies chastised by the Orthodox leadership.

The Lutheran World Federation is Building New Bridges

A UN resolution from 1994 has given the work of the Lutheran World Federation in ex-Yugoslavia new spark. International law recognizes the "Krajina", the Serb-occupied portions of Croatia, as Croatian soil. The Croatian government would therefore be weakening its claim to the Krajina territories if it completely rejected aid to them.

Despite the imminent threat of war, the LWF has capitalized on this opportunity by launching a new program. Plans are afoot to supply schools and a soup kitchen in Vukovar with 5,900 meals daily. Hermina Nikolaisen, the new German director of the LWF's program for ex-Yugoslavia, lives only a few miles across the frontier in Osijek.

According to John Wood, LWF's outgoing director, "Almost all European Community aid goes to Bosnia. Nobody talks about the UNPA's (Krajina). They get left out." Despite a nearly equal number of refugees, Serb-held territories have received only 20% of all humanitarian foreign aid.

The LWF has also begun projects elsewhere in the Krajina: in Drvis and in Knin, which is capital and stronghold of the Serb rebel government, LWF has been--or will be--involved in water supply projects. "We've been fairly careful about this," Professor Wood insists. "We're operating under the umbrella of UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for
Refugees) and the European Community." The Croatian government in Zagreb could use its veto to block any aid to the Krajina.

The LWF is present even in the war-torn enclave of Bihać in Bosnia. Audunn Olaffson of Iceland is supplying farmers with seed and fertilizer only several miles from the active front. According to Wood, LWF is active so near to the hostilities because "it's so difficult to get food in. We never know when transports will be stopped again."

Besides heightening morale among the farmers, such aid also lowers the incentive to flee. Empty land is most easily conquered, while populated territories make "ethnic cleansing" more difficult. "We can't have more refugees," Wood insists. "The Muslim areas of Bosnia are terribly overcrowded, and the international community is getting tired of refugees. Where else do you go?"

Olaffson, who is able to shuttle between the rebel Muslim forces of Fikret Abdić in the north of the enclave and the Muslim forces loyal to the Sarajevo government, serves as a vital news courier. Asked what profit he gains from placing himself in such danger, Olaffson responds: "The 'thank you's' of the children in Bihać hospital are profit enough for me."

**Hans Koschnick, a Lutheran Reconciler**

The wall behind the entrance to West Mostar's tiny Pentecostal church is pockmarked by enormous bullet holes. "That was my father-in-law," the young believer explained. Overpowered by wrath at the church's secretary, the parent had taken up position in the yard and fired into the building with his Kalashnikov when he spied the woman moving about between the sacks of flour.

Violence and corruption remain daily fare in the divided city of Mostar, Herzegovina. Though only a tiny percentage of Mostar's citizens possess a legal occupation, Croatian West Mostar's car population appears nearly as impressive as California's.

Muslim East Mostar stems from another planet. Destruction is on par with Stalingrad or Grozny, the streets are brimming with idle pedestrians. West Mostar's currency, the Croatian kuna, is rejected as 'fascist,' police keep traffic between the two parts of the city to a bare minimum.

The energetic mayor of both Mostar sectors, the German Lutheran and long-time mayor of Bremen, Hans Koschnick, explains: "The civil war here was of manageable size; the people know who chased whom out of their flats and across the river. They know who threw whom in jail and who shot at whom. In such a situation, reconciliation occurs at a much, much slower pace."

Koschnick, installed as mayor by the European Community July 23, 1994, was welcomed by a rocket attack on his hotel six weeks later. The mayor is matter-of-fact about the
affair: "I knew before I came that I would be the target of three or four terrorist groups in West Mostar. It's clear they wanted to eliminate the European administration, but we will not give in to extortion."

The reunification of Mostar remains Hans Koschnick's primary goal. When he departs after two years of service, he hopes that "the people of the city will once again be willing to live, work, and attend school together. But they'll still need to spend their evenings with their own friends and families. For now, it's too much to expect them to spend their leisure time with persons of other religions or nationalities."

The experience of World War II led Koschnick, who grew up in a Marxist family ravaged by the Nazis, to Christianity. He has since then dedicated much of his time to reconciliation with the citizens of Poland and Israel. His efforts in Mostar are a part of that tradition. He admits, that "the bridge builders here stem neither from the church nor from the Muslim clergy. That's a problem for me. After all, we're all children of the same creation."

Church Fireworks in Serbia

Life is surprisingly calm for the Lutheran church of Croatia. The majority Catholic church has largely accepted it as a legitimate, native part of Croatian society. Steady growth is occurring; membership presently peaks at 7,500.

Matters are more unruly in Serb-held territories. Nationalist Orthodox bishops such as Atanasije of Mostar and Amfilohija of Montenegro have expressed support for radical paramilitary forces such as the Chetniks and called for battle against the decadent, once-Christian West.

Last June, the Orthodox paper, Pravoslavlje, printed Atanasije's attack on the mayor of Trebinje in Serb-ruled Bosnia. The mayor was accused of tolerating the "soul-killing propaganda" of local Adventists. The Bishop added that the Adventists, "like everything devilish," stem from America. Another article implied that evangelical groups were similar to Satanist ones. A Christmas letter signed by the Orthodox Patriarch Pavle and his bishops later warned strongly against Western influences.

A letter from the Orthodox bishops last July had condemned the UN plan for Bosnia and the return of any territory now controlled by the Serbs. This provoked an angry response by Germany's Evangelical Church (EKD) calling the paper an "intolerable overstatement of the union of nationality and religion".

Radical Orthodox clergy prefer Radovan Karadžić, leader of the "Serbian Republic" of Bosnia. While church rights in Serbia remain unclarified, the new Bosnian Serb constitution has given the Orthodox church all the privileges of a state church.

The historic Reformation churches remain somewhat cushioned from this struggle. Since they represent national minorities and usually speak a foreign language, they are not
officially in competition with the Orthodox for the allegiance of the Serbian people. Andrej Beredi, Bishop of the Slovak Lutheran Church in the Voyvodina (northern Serbia), takes a very cautious stance. He combats attempts by German Lutheran circles to scold or boycott the Serbian Orthodox church. Fearing charges of proselytization, he declines to engage in evangelism.

The two-year-old "Ecumenical Humanitarian Service" regards this position as timid. It has opened a study center in Feketić, Voyvodina, with aid from Hungarian Protestants and attempts to take a stand on moral and political issues. This organization was founded by Hungarian-speaking Reformed groups with Lutheran support. By hiring Orthodox and Catholic employees, it is now beginning to reflect the multi-ethnic, pluralistic flavor of north Serbian society.