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working, playing, observing

By Jan-Willem Vermeulen, Balkan Sunflowers volunteer in Albania and Macedonia, July-August 1999

Swimming in the mountains

Looking back after 3 weeks on the Balkan I remember most the fun of playing with the children. But it is double: the joy of playing with the children on one side and the stories of the refugees on the other side. It feels somewhat strange to talk about fun and fascinating because of the recent crisis and the situation most refugees are in. But that's why I went: to play football, help with a drawing and listen to somebody's story, no more, no less. The background is cruel but I can't change that.

One evening we had a discussion about what the work we do means to us. That morning and also the day before we were in the refugee camp Kashar near Tirana and took some children swimming. I took a little girl in my arms and walked down to the deeper water, she hold me tight. All I could ask her was 'Mir?', meaning 'good'. She just smiled and answered my question with 'mir, mir!'. On the way back she carried 2 bags because she wanted to do something back, I was asking if she was all right and kept offering to take one bag but she wouldn't allow me. Those little things, that is what the 'work' meant to me.

Albania

When I left Holland I was told I was going to work in a refugee-camp near Vlorë in the south of Albania. In June and the beginning of July a lot of refugees returned to Kosov@. It seems that this has been the crisis with the fastest return of refugees. On arriving in Albania the refugee-camp near Vlorë was empty, like most camps.

A small camp some 15 kilometre north of Tirana, Kashar, was still opened. Some 120 people were still living there in the beginning of the week. At the end of my first week it was more or less empty. The first day a little boy called Sadri taught

me how to count to 30 in Albanian, the day after he had left for Kosov@. In Kashar we most of the times started with ball-games while others would start with drawing. It usually was that warm that after about an hour we would all be sitting in the shade drawing, painting or doing another game.

In Albania we also worked in an orphanage, usually in the afternoon. About 60 to 70 children are living in the orphanage, a third is mentally handicapped. We had the idea that many of those children were abused. It was a difficult group to work with. Most of the day they didn't have much to do. When we came in we brought them together to play. Most did not have the social skills to play together. Even getting them in line was sometimes difficult. Most of the times we stayed for about an hour because that was about the time we could get their attention. I felt somewhat uncomfortable towards the staff of the orphanage.. we came in, played a little and would leave again. It was obvious that the orphanage does not have a lot of money. It was good to be there, the children in the orphanage have had a hard life so far and their future...

That first week most of us had a mine awareness and a first aid training. The most important of the mine awareness is that if you see a mine all you do is nothing! You just stand still and get somebody to call KFOR. Because, if there is one mine there could be ten more, there could be a mine just near your shoe. KFOR will get their mine-experts to clear the road leading to you and clear the mine. The first aid-training was somewhat absurd. We did get about the entire first-aid in about two hours, including what to do with big open flesh-wounds.

Albania is supposedly not a very safe country. Crime is well-organised and every man carries a gun. In the centre of Tirana



you can see a lot of nice cars, most seem to be stolen. At night you'll hear gun-shots. I was there only for one week but did not feel unsafe. What you'll still notice of the communist system is the macho-behaviour of the soldiers and policemen as well as the policemen on the streets who seem very busy but who actually do nothing. All their looks did to me was looking back at them, 'i can also look angry'.

Macedonia

After a week in Albania our group split up. New volunteers arrived in Tirana and there was not enough work while in Macedonia and Kosov@ people were needed. Me and Bill went to Macedonia. Jessica and Jonathan went to Kosov@. The others, Nicole, Dana and Jurka would stay a little bit longer in Tirana and would later go to Macedonia. Me and Bill took the bus from Tirana to Skopje in Macedonia. The bus ride took about 10 hours, of which we spend one hour at the border. In Albania I counted many bunkers. Those bunkers were build during the communist period, probably out of some paranoia. If you come from Albania and go to Macedonia you'll soon notice the differences: the roads and signs are better and the country looks better organised. Monday evening we arrived in Skopje.

At that time there were 2 projects running in Macedonia: Shutka and Cegrane. Shutka is a Roma-neighbourhood in the north of Skopje. Cegrane is (was ?) a refugee camp near Gostivar where there were still about 4000 refugees living in tents.

Putting up tents in refugee camp Cegrane

We decided to go to Cegrane on Tuesday and get an impression of the camp. I was surprised to find a bumpingcars-installation at the entrance of the camp, somebody thought this was a good way to make some money. The camp is located on a hillside near the village Cegrane, overlooking a valley.

That day and the day after about 1500 refugees were expected to arrive , all coming from the refugee camp Stenkovec 2. Many locals, working for Care International, were busy putting up tents and so were some of the volunteers of the Balkan Sunflowers; Kim, Andy, Toby, Jason and Seth. Me and Bill decided to help putting up tents. Our first tent must have been quite bad. We wondered who would be willing to live in that tent. In the evening we returned to Skopje. That day it was very hot. An afternoon working on the hillside took all my energy. Imagine living there for a few months. Later I heard that in the beginning of the crisis about 47.000 people lived in Cegrane. About 25.000 arrived in 2 days.

I realised it might be hard to work in the camp because of the simple conditions but rewarding because there were many children. You walk into the camp and all around the children are saying 'hello' or come up to you to give you a 'high five'. Me and Bill decided to work in Cegrane for the rest of our stay on the Balkans. I also realised that we were able to live there because we could leave the camp any time we wanted and get back to our 'regular' life.

Wednesday morning we returned to the camp to 'live' and work there. I carried my backpack and a big bag with toys. At the entrance of the camp, on the foot of the hillside, 4 boys came up to us and offered to carry our bags. Jeton and another boy carried my bag up to the compound where we would stay for the next 2 weeks. If you work with children there are always some who become a little bit more special to you, because they somehow attract your attention or come up to you to hold your hands. Jeton was one of the children who became a little bit more special.

In Cegrane the Balkan Sunflowers had several activities running: organising volleyball and basketball games, trying to get a camp-newsletter, English-lessons, drawing or just playing with children like throwing frisbees. Besides that, we most of



the times just jumped in to where help was needed. In the morning I often went to another NGO and help them.

Fear

After some days I would also walk around and try to get in contact with refugees. The refugee camp Cegrane is an open camp. The people living in the camp could leave if they wanted. But still many would stay in their tents most of the day to secure their properties. I often was invited to have some coffee. The stories you hear are not new but looking somebody in the eyes while he tells what happened to him is more confronting than a burned-out house or a picture on TV. Someone told me that the Serbs came into his house and told him to leave within a few minutes with his family. He was aggressively send out. Outside he saw a neighbour being shot and at the moment of leaving he saw his house was on fire. The fear must have been enormous.

A boy told me that he tried to flee with his family by train. He and his brother were the only ones of the family who could get on the train; since than he hasn't seen his father and mother.

Recently I received a message from Kim, an Australian volunteer, who described some of the things he heard: 'A thirty-year-old mother of four witnessed the execution of twenty-eight people in her village. Hiding in bushes, she covered her children's eyes with her arms. Her husband disappeared eight months ago. Last week she discovered that her uncle and cousin were trying to find her. She has been reunited with them, but her husband's whereabouts remains a mystery'.

I walked through the camp on a late evening while the sun went down behind the mountains on the other side of the valley and tried to realise what most people had been through, I couldn't. The peaceful atmosphere of the camp by night seemed a contradiction with the reason of the existence of the camp.

America

One afternoon a group would leave the camp to go to America. An older man, probably 70 or 80 years old, was standing with his 3 sons. He spoke some German and told me that all his three sons were leaving to go to America. They didn't know for how long they would go, one year ? two years ? five years ? It was difficult to him. Would he ever see them back ? I just stood and listened.

The day before I left I walked up to the tent of Jeton and his family. Just that day or the day before they were told that they were allowed to go to Chicago, America. I wondered if there was something I could tell them about Chicago: I made a little drawing of the Chicago skyline and the 440 m high Sears Tower. A few days earlier I was looking at the board with the names of people going to America as well as their destinations. Bill told me that not at all places they would be welcomed with open arms. It was clear anyhow that most of the refugees going to America were facing a difficult period. They will be separated from home, friends and family, they don't speak the language and probably won't find work.

The Monday before I left the Balkan I was in Skopje where I met Amy who was going to work in Cegrane. She is from Chicago and told me she worked for a refugee-organisation in Chicago. She, for example, helped families from Kosov@ to go shopping. I told her about Jetons family that was going to Chicago. She told me that she could try to find where they are staying.

Kosov@

I worked in Cegrane for two weeks. The weekend in between me and Bill went to Kosov@. I had my doubts beforehand because I only was curious to see what happened. Afterwards I am glad I went because it gave some insight to what happened and it gave the opportunity to talk to people. We took the bus from Pristina to Pec, which is in the west of Kosov@. The

bus took about 2 hours. I noticed that also the Kosovarians in the bus were curious about the situation. We passed a Serb church that was broken down, a bridge was bombed by NATO and many houses were set on fire.

In Pec it took us 2 hours and quite some luck to find the volunteers of the Balkan Sunflowers; Casey, Heike and Lisa. We stayed in the house of a family. The house was completely empty, all they had were some clothes, mattresses, a table and chairs. But even despite their situation they allowed us to stay. In the neighbourhood many houses were damaged. During the night a house was set on fire. It must have been a Serb house put on fire to make sure that the Serbs don't return.

On the way back I talked to a 23-year old guy who was a UCK-commander during the war. He traveled with 3 friends, all fought for the UCK. He told me that Pec was so damaged because there are quite some historic Serb sites around the town.

Antigona, Blind

Antigona was a little girl who would sometimes come up to me and just walk with me holding my hand. I asked her in which tent she was staying. She wrote down E 6/4. One afternoon I went there to have a look. I met her father and mother and was invited into the tent. Within no time the tent was filled with children of whom most were brothers and sisters of Antigona. She lived in the tent with her father and mother and six brothers and sisters. Nine persons in one tent. I asked her father to write the names and the ages of all his children, he did: Florjana 12, Antigona 9, Miradije 8, Leoneta 7, Edmona 5, Leotrim 2 and Shqiprim 1. Her father told me he fought

for the UCK. He was shot through his knee and showed his scars. He still carried an army hat.

One morning I was helping another NGO that was organising drawing for a group of children. We gave all the children a big sheet of paper. Besides their name and age they could draw whatever they wanted. I passed all the children and handed out crayons. The drawing of a little boy called Blind drew my attention. He was using the colour black and was drawing the figure of a woman, lying down and with a dramatic expression on her face. He also drew some apples which he coloured completely black as well as a house. Later on he came to me and asked another crayon, he chose red. A little later I saw he made another house. It was not hard to figure out he must have seen something.

Leaving

A good thing of the voluntary work is meeting other volunteers. During the second week more BSF-volunteers arrived; Mark, Cecily, Erica, Leentje, Jannie, Megan and Meeuw.

Just before I left I heard that the organisations had miscounted the number of refugees in the camp and that there were about 3500 people left at that time. A few days later another 500 people would leave and go to America.

I had promised a boy called Sula to take him on a ride in a bumping car, the last day I did. Sunday afternoon I left the camp. Jeton, the little boy who carried my bag up the first day, walked with me down to the little village and waved goodbye until I was out of sight. I hope to receive his address.





vlora diary

*Sali Gabriella McIntire, Sunflowers volunteer in Durres, Tirana and Vlora, Albania
Vlora Diary: two weeks in the Shamogjin refugee camp*

June 15th, 1999. After a hasty preparation, my trip to Albania began in earnest. Flying from the glamorous Orlando airport to the small provincial airport of Naples was a fitting way to prepare for working with Kosovar refugees in Albania. Suddenly I found myself in the heart of southern Italy - depressed and haphazard- the people almost as friendly as in years past, perhaps a little more wary. Instead of being immigrants themselves, leaving an impoverished country as my father's generation was forced to do, the Neapolitani were witnessing the arrival of immigrants from nearly every neighboring country: Algeria, Morocco, and since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the Eastern block countries and Albania. The immigrants are mostly illegal and mostly very poor.

On the train to Bari I was treated to the almost obligatory "discussion", which means a heated argument about nothing, between the ticket taker and about five passengers. I got the feeling that he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, but in reality, he was just trying to get an adrenalin rush to get himself through the length of the train and to keep his day from being totally boring. These little theatrical pieces remind me of the old Pulcinella puppet shows in the parks of my youth.

The ferry to Durres leaves the Bari harbor every night at 11 p.m. with the usual confusion of loading vehicles and passengers going through customs. The last time I took a ferry from Bari was over 30 years ago, headed for that then exquisite Yugoslavian jewel, Dubrovnik. The ferry was an old rusty boat, with stinking hot cabins. I remember that it listed to one side the entire trip, making walking and sleeping tedious. This night I was confronted with a huge, modern ship with air conditioning and comfortable cabins with hot showers. Another

major difference was that nearly all the vehicles being loaded into the hold were military trucks, ambulances, Red Cross jeeps and an assortment of smaller trucks painted with the names of different solidarity organizations and filled with hand-collected aid for the Kosovar refugees. Most of the passengers were wearing uniforms that matched their vehicles: the Alpine battalion of the Italian army; French firemen; Belgian Red Cross workers; African nuns; all, with the exception of the last group, smoking incessantly. I was the only individual traveling alone with a backpack. I am one of thousands - a tiny hand that, joined with others, may make a difference. There is a sense of humility as well as hope. It feels good - and a little frightening.

Durres (Durazzo). From the ship, Albania looked like a charming and very backward, but quite peaceful country. A heavy morning rain cleansed the air and helped to settle the dust which would accompany me for most of my journey. The Albanian people were extraordinarily friendly and helpful. As I left the ship laden with the toys, crayons, knitting needles and yarn given to me by friends for the refugees, I felt surely if I could manage this leg of the journey I would be home free. The language was much more difficult than I had imagined and fewer Albanians spoke Italian. After about a two mile walk through pot holes and mud puddles, I finally found the mini-bus stop for Tirana and crammed myself and my bags into the next available one. There was only one other woman and all the men smoked constantly. The hour and some trip to Tirana, the capital of Albania, gave a solid introduction to the Albanian roads and to the Albanian style of driving. The road was filled with pot-holes, and in many cases, it ceased to look like a road at all. However the driver, who passed on curves and hills and drove at top speed most of the time, had good re-

flexes and in many ways I was happy to have the trip over with sooner rather than later.

Finding the Balkan Sunflower office/hostel was no easy trick and I began to think of Wam Kat, our Dutch coordinator, as some sort of maniacal sadist, giving directions to deliberately confuse new volunteers. If you could find your way then you had passed the initiation and could work as a full fledged volunteer, otherwise, if you gave up and took a taxi or worse, telephoned, you would be sent away in disgrace. I did finally manage to get "home" though the very helpful Albanians did not recognize any of the reference points given in Wam Kat's (dubbed Kumquat by my husband, Peppe, whom I left behind) detailed instructions. Several times along the way I was tempted to give away or just leave behind my suitcase full of toys, but tenacity paid off and they came in very handy later on in the camps. By the way, Wam is not a maniacal sadist, but a lovely, over-worked genius, trying to effect change in the most vulnerable of the vulnerable refugee population: the children.

I had come to Albania to work with a Non Governmental Organization called the Balkan Sunflowers, a small grass-roots organization, that, with a strong group of volunteers from every corner of the world, was working directly in the refugee camps, and directly with the children. The Balkan Sunflowers chose wisely not to get involved in the distribution of relief, but focused almost exclusively on the psycho-social well being of the children, and by extension, their mothers. The work being done by the Sunflowers was and is so valuable that the organization has been recognized by UNICEF and we were able to work with UNICEF, doing the vital work of hands on, one on one PLAYING with the children that UNICEF was simply unable to manage.

With virtually no orientation or briefing, I, along with three other new volunteers, was assigned to leave the next morning early for the Dutch-Belgian Red Cross camp outside of Vlora. This meant another ride on a

mini-bus, this time for over four hours. Fortunately, the driver spoke Italian and I spent the entire time getting Camber (Moustache in English) to teach me some key words in Albanian. Unfortunately, I had to sit in the front where the passing on blind curves was a little more difficult to ignore.

Shamogjin Camp: 20 km north of Vlora, where the Adriatic Sea folds into the Ionian. From a distance the camp gave a very surrealistic picture and as I looked at it from the road, chills went up and down my spine and my skin was all goose bumps, even at 95 degrees Fahrenheit.

This camp, built to tent 2,500 refugees, was situated on the cupola of a hill. All the olive trees were cut down to make the construction easier, and the result was a shadeless, inverted dust bowl. It was mercilessly hot and the only shade was inside the sauna-like tents. Our Dutch- Belgian hosts were anything but friendly, but I decided from the outset not to get involved with administrative issues and problems - of which there was a generous surplus.

I shared a tent with Heidi, another Balkan Sunflower volunteer from Switzerland. Heidi spoke a few words of Albanian, but when she got stuck she just nodded and laughed gently at everything people said. Sometimes I feared they might be telling her some gruesome tale of what had happened to their husband or one of their children before they arrived in Albania, and Heidi would just smile and nod. Our tent was unlivable for more than a minute after 7:00 a.m. or before 9:00 p.m., unless you wanted to be dripping with sweat.

As some of the refugees had already left to return to Kosova and the camp was underutilized, Heidi and I managed to get our own individual "conference/recreation room" tents. We could roll up the sides so we had protection from the sun and plenty of breeze to keep them relatively cool. Let's say, bearable. The breeze, which often took on proportions of a wind storm, had pros and cons. It blew huge gusts of

dirt and dust in our faces and into our lungs, and as the days wore on, I felt like I had eaten half the hillside.

The Balkan Sunflowers had been working here for several weeks. One volunteer had broken or twisted her leg and had to go back home, Mike had left as his time was up, so other than getting shown our tent there was practically no orientation. The kids were the ones to break us in. The Sunflowers had taught them the essential English words for communication. "Ball" and "cards" (pronounced "karte") were high on the list, with a shouted "OKAAYYY???" being the catch all when all else failed. The kids jumped all over us, quickly shifting their allegiance from the departing Sunflowers to the arriving ones. To show off they counted over and over in English; one, two, three, beating time with their hands and heads.

This Dutch-Belgian effort was such a vast difference from the camps I had worked in before. The tents were large and sturdy with robust tent poles and braces...not like the rows and rows of plastic on thin slats of wood of the UNHCR camps for Guatemalan refugees. The Dutch staff had a fenced-in building on the peak of the hill (affectionately, or perhaps disdainfully, called the Taj Mahal) with the well-protected, treated water supply. The refugees and Sunflowers were below with latrines a little too near our tents and cup-n-bucket shower stalls a lot too far away. But in compensation they were on the side of the hill with a great view of the sunset - I quickly found that the best time to take a shower was at sunset. It was cooling down enough to avoid breaking into a new sweat and warm enough so that the water I had sitting in the sun all day was refreshing rather than shocking. There was still enough light to find my way along the rocky, bramble-filled path and in plenty of time to watch the sun go down over the incredibly beautiful plain before us. The sheep were getting their last grazing in before reentry and milking. Idyllic, except for the reality that this was not a summer outing, with camping in a beautiful park. It

was rude, temporary housing for people who have suffered the worst kind of trauma; stories I was to hear unfold slowly as I was able to gain the confidence of the women and children.

Over the days to come I discovered that Shamogjin Camp housed one of the poorest of the refugee groups. There was not one car or tractor in the population of nearly a thousand. Most everyone was from a small village, most are farmers. Interestingly, no one here was trying to go to Italy by a mafia-run boat. Many of the neighboring camps were not so lucky. There was a group of Italian and Albanian gangsters who were trafficking in girls and hopeful immigrants to get across the Ionian sea to Italy. Vlora is the closest point to Italy and countless boats made the trip every night. We were warned about the 8:00 PM curfew in Vlora. Evidently the "malavita" (lowlife) takes over the city and good, honest folk hide in their homes until dawn. Our refugees all wanted to go back to Kosova and since the peace treaty had been signed, no one spoke of anything else.

Time to talk about FOOD. When we first arrived there had been a meager attempt at providing one hot meal daily. Women were entirely excluded from the kitchen, and the food preparation was done by the older men in the camp. There was no fresh food except for an occasional sack of potatoes or onions. The meal consisted of dumping numerous donated cans of some often unidentifiable vegetables into several huge cauldrons and heating the entire slop to warm. The women and children would line up with their cooking pots or buckets to take the mixture home. Sometimes the refugees were given some unopened canned vegetables like beets or Brussel sprouts which they have never seen before. Large loaves of white bread with a fairly decent crust topped the meal. If you go by the communal garbage barrels about half an hour after dinner, you will find a good part of the soup there along with other items that they simply cannot

recognize or assimilate mentally or physically.

Each family had been given a small gas burner so, if they had money, they could buy coffee, sugar and other food to supplement the meals. Last night I got to lunch too late, so they gave us a tin of rindfleisch - a little like spam, but because of its look and texture, had been rejected by all but the most daring of the refugees. I gave my share to Heidi who enjoyed it thoroughly. About half an hour later one of the refugees who worked in the kitchen came by our tent with a small piece of dried, very salty cheese which he slipped to us. Faleminderit (thanks!).

There were three other Balkan Sunflowers working with us; Casey, Lisa and Karen. They were all long term volunteers and preferred to live in the Sunflower apartment in Vlora. Casey spent some nights with us, but the three were very busy going to the many camps in the area teaching mine awareness to the children.

My work. I started by meeting with about a fourth of the women in the camp. We talked (always through a translator) about getting together and sharing "women things"; feeling and frustrations, in an open ended way. The response was very positive. We talked about whether knitting or crocheting would help them with their stress level (not exactly in those words, but they were the ones to voice that opinion). Again the response was positive. I then had similar meetings with most of the other women in the camp and set about augmenting my small supply of knitting and crochet needles and wool so that every woman in the camp would have something to knit. This was not such an easy task as both yarn and needles are in short supply and very expensive in Vlora (almost double the cost of the equivalent in the US).

Once everyone was happily knitting we began the sharing of feelings. I would go early in the morning, before it got unbearably hot and visit a group of three to five women who would sit around under an

awning connecting two tents. They would knit and we would talk. After the usual chit-chat the conversation would go to their recent experience and I sometimes felt that for some of the women this was the first time they had shared their emotions with a larger group. Sometimes women would offer consolation or advice, sometimes they would just remain silent and cry in solidarity or about their own grief. The overriding fear of the widows was of being left behind by the families with men and/or money.

It was hard to listen to their stories, hard to know what to say, but somehow that woman to woman bond was established and we gradually became very close. They loved to show off their knitting, which was lovely and creative, usually a sweater for a small child - there just wasn't enough wool for anything bigger. Sometimes the attention would be good and the conversation animated, but at the close of each visit they invariably ask the question that had been on their minds all the time; when can we go back to Kosova? To which I would respond, soon...I hope!

So much is happening it's hard to keep up. One evening as I was walking among the tents on my way to the water faucet I could hear an incessant wailing that seemed to rise and fall with some unwritten rhythm. At first I thought it must be the call to prayer, but the voices were female and we had never had a call to prayer in this camp. As I drew closer I could hear shouting so I peeked in to see if something was wrong. About 10 women and children were weeping and wailing, some throwing themselves on the ground, tearing at their voluminous pants. A teen age boy was sprinkling the face of one of the women with water and shouting at her to calm down. The more he shouted, the louder she would weep. I discovered that they had just received news that all the men in their family had been killed. Someone had just arrived who was from their village and had given them the news. This awful news spread through the camp and a new sense of dread went through the other refugees, especially the



women who had been separated from their husbands and older male children. Whether they were members of the U.C.K. (Kosovar Revolutionary Forces) or not really didn't matter. If you were young and a Kosovar male you would be suspected of being a member, so you might as well get a gun and defend yourself.

I gave my condolences and left the family as the tent filled with neighbors and the pitch of their shrieks grew. The wife and mother were in a complete state of collapse. As I walked by the store-room I noticed that it was open and something was being distributed. In spite of my sadness I couldn't help but see the ludicrousness of this moment. Before me were stacks and stacks of German Nutella in little yoghurt containers. A third of a cup per person. Plus the usual bread. Nutella, in case you haven't experienced it yet, is the Italian answer to peanut butter, based on hazel nuts and extremely sweet and creamy. Dinner with a sugar high!

Another day, another heart-wrenching departure. I've only been here a week and I feel the deep bonds which were so fragile and so carefully constructed with many of the women being torn apart. Vehicles of every description are arriving at the camp at all hours of the day and night. Security has totally broken down as has the camp hygiene. Yesterday at 6 a.m. I said goodbye to two families who had engaged a dilapidated truck with a canvas top, which they filled to the brim with everything that the Red Cross had given them: foam rubber mattresses, blankets, clothing, tents, cots and supplies. When I thought they could not load a single thing more, 23 people, old and young, climbed or were hoisted up to the top of the pile with their loaves of bread and some stale bread crusts. They would spend the better part of two days there. The truck was paid for by a brother/son who came directly from his work in Zurich to help his family, now without a male figure, return to Kosova. The man could only accompany the truck as far as Tirana, less than half the distance, as he had to fly back to his job or risk getting

fired. Then the family would be at the mercy of the truck driver, who could at any moment threaten them with extortion. I knew then that I would never learn their fate.

Today there was a big meeting with the A-FOR (NATO forces in Albania). Two Italians in fatigues came and met with the male population. Speaking in Italian with a very poor translator, they explained that roads are mined, houses are mined, wells are contaminated. As a vivid example of the last, the Italian explained that the Serbs had thrown dead livestock into their wells. They described some of the land mines, especially "butterfly" mines, made in Yugoslavia and a big success in the world-wide arms industry, made of brightly colored plastic, and explained that they were impossible to detect with anti-mine equipment and very attractive to children. They passed out a slick brochure written in Albanian. It had bright red pictures of mines exploding, but the men were not interested - they were angry and spoke out so fast the translator could not keep up.

The Italians walked out and the camp director took over the meeting - a meeting where no one listened and no one heard. The men said " we will wait one week and then, with you or without A-FOR, we will leave. Another said they had received no milk for the children for three days. There are about 300 small children still left in this camp. The food is worse at each meal. Today there was no hot meal and only bread was served.

The kitchen officially closed for good today. Bread will be handed out daily, but no one seemed to know what time and if you missed it, that was it. I had found a source for fresh figs from the neighboring hill and so bought a kilo or two of figs daily. That and bread and the odd canned goods were our mainstay. The Albanian security guard brought me a kilo of salty cheese. Salty cheese is a euphemism for a lump of salt with a little milk coagulated in it. As the days past, it became more and more delicious. It was so hot that I had little

appetite, but some of the refugees were desperate. I say "some" because those who were fortunate enough to have relatives working abroad and who send them money, were able to buy food from the vendor who parked at the edge of the camp every few days with the trunk of his old Mercedes filled with food and toiletries.

I should make it clear that at any time I could have walked down the hill, taken the mini-bus to Vlora (about half an hour away) and bought plenty of food in the market. I would not have been able to cook, but I could have had cheese and fresh vegetables and fruit. We chose to live alongside of the refugees and to experience what they had been living for nearly three months. Besides our conference/play tent was always full of people, even at dinner time. How could we do otherwise? I found out early on that the refugees did not like figs and the kids especially made funny faces as they watched us devour our daily kilo of fresh figs, which, by the way, were double the size of the biggest fig I have ever seen in Italy, and just as succulent.

This morning (5:30 a.m. - fantastic, chilly dawn) it was a bus. A kind of socialist version of Greyhound, only maybe 20 years old and road weary. Several families packed the back half of the bus and crowded into the remaining seats. It was impossible to tell where one family left off and another began. A woman was squatting by the side of the bus, rocking a hand-made wooden cradle. I peeked under layers of covers to find the tiniest little creature imaginable. The phrase "wrapped in swaddling clothes" suddenly became a real image, though in the biblical references there is no mention of the urine penetrating all the folds and dripping through the antique wood. The last to enter the bus, the nervous mother gestured to me to pass her the baby as she had her arms filled with clothes. As we made the delicate transfer to the inside the bus I wondered what was in store for this littlest of Kosovar refugees. Would she grow up in a free

society, able to learn her language and practice her religion or might she be blown away by a butterfly mine undetected for a time, only to be a brutal reminder of the tragedy that had already taken place? I tried to hand the dripping cradle to the bus driver, but he shouted at me that the bus was too full and closed the door in my face. Somehow as the bus engine groaned to start, I managed to get it through a back window and watched as it was slowly passed forward to the mother and child. Another group of refugees was off, full of a mixture of hope and dread of what they would find in their villages.

The wind velocity has risen considerably and last night sleep was a hit and miss affair. The wind cut across the plain and slammed into the side of the hill, increasing as it raced up to the top, creating a Mt Washington effect. Our tent was a series of noises: it creaked and groaned and flapped all day and that night several of the poles collapsed.

The land of Little Frogs and Giant Crickets... There are crickets everywhere. Not those nice little crickets that fiddle at sunset, but big, mean looking crickets that invade your tent, get in your clothes, your food, crawl all over your sheets, and at night, delight in crackling the plastic tarp that serves as our floor covering. If you try to flick them away, they jump on you and stare you down in defiance. They range in size from about 1 ½ inches to a good four inches. The frogs, on the other hand, are tiny and friendly without being invasive. Since it hasn't rained for days they are quite quiet, too...

The children: It was difficult to distinguish the girls from the boys as they had all had their heads shaved for lice and wore shorts and tee shirts. Their difficult Albanian names didn't give me much of a clue, either. Our work was to create an environment that was friendly and inviting - where they would feel secure away from their parents, where they could play and laugh and ignore the trauma they had suffered and eventually, to work through that

trauma and let it go. Many of the parents were severely traumatized and the children shared that trauma. Some had been hiding in holes in the woods for days without food or water. Some had family members who had been shot or tortured and killed right in front of them. The stories were many, but the result was always the same; deep trauma.

The kids that came to us spontaneously were the strongest, the least affected by the conflict. With them our only problem was communication. The children had never before come in contact with people who couldn't understand what they were saying. In their frustration they would shout at us and physically yank at our clothing. Then they tried using single words (as we did) and repeat themselves over and over (as we did). Once we established a quadri-lingual vocabulary of about 10 words in Albanian, English, Italian and German (call it Esperanto if you will), all the doors were open. Some of the words were: thank you, good morning, chess, cards, brother, sister, food, knitting and a few others. Linguists note, we/they never used the word please. Counting continued to be a favorite pastime. It developed into something like this: wan, du, tree, quattro, cinque, six, seven, ate, nigh, tane, OKAAYYY?????

I taught the younger boys how to play checkers. The older boys taught me chess. Well, not really. They taught me just enough to take immense delight in beating me every time. Heidi played memory games with the smaller girls. They made their own cards with drawings of dogs, cats, horses and some other unidentifiable animals. All the animals looked alike - kind of a sausage dog with long ears, but the kids had no trouble distinguishing them. Then we had home, school, flowers, tree, bus and sun. Those who didn't get at least one match didn't return. The few times that I played, I got zero matches.

Sadria. I have identified several women in the camp who have no support base; husbands and male children have been killed or are missing; their extended family or

neighbors have made their way back to Kosova leaving them to their own peril. Usually it was a case of "the boat is full". There was simply no money to pay for everyone and the weakest were sacrificed. Sadria has three very traumatized children. They wouldn't speak, they wouldn't go to school or play with the other children. They just clung to their mother. Sadria was clearly suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. She was so depressed she didn't wash or cook. Her tent was like a garbage deposit. The Kosovar women were generally extremely neat and clean, their tents looked like a pasha dwelling, blankets covering the floor, mattresses all around the sides and tea waiting for any visitor who happened by. In contrast, Sadria had weeks of open tins of sardines, rindfleisch, dirty dishes, Nutella-filled spoons, half empty, worm-filled baby food jars and tons of moldy crusts of bread thrown at random around the tent. Dirty clothes had been stuffed into corners where the rain converted them into a putrid mass.

My task was to animate Sadria to take an interest in life, to recover her self-esteem and to take care of her three small children. The nearly two year old was still breast-feeding. All, including Sadria, were covered with lice. I began by listening to her story. She remained with a flat affect, speaking softly and without apparent emotion, telling of the invasion by the Serbs and how her husband and teenage son were taken away. At the time she was nine months pregnant with three small children. She ran away with the flood of refugees to the mountains where she gave birth to her baby, which in a very short time, died. Her milk continued to flow and she used it to feed her one year old girl who is now a chubby blue-eyed tow-headed darling, but who refused to leave her mother's breast even for a moment. She would not walk. The other two children were equally traumatized. The sight of this woman dragging herself around the camp, unable to collect her food, unable to cook and oblivious to even the most basic hygiene, was perhaps one of the most potent ex-



amples of the subtle long-term devastation this war has caused.

I have worked with Sadria one-on-one for nearly two weeks with hardly a change. I finally got to the point where I felt close enough to her to ask if she would like me to help her straighten out her tent. Together we removed three barrels of garbage, piled all her dirty dishes and utensils in a bucket, put all the salvable dirty clothes in another and swept out the tent, changed the urine soaked mattresses and blankets and gently and lovingly got her to take a shower and wash all her kids and shampoo with anti-lice shampoo.

News of a major robbery in the Italian Arcobaleno (Rainbow) camp and of the disappearance of a young girl in the "Monastery" camp, visible across the hill, had made the refugees very afraid to stay here and they were looking for any possible way of getting out. Meanwhile the trucks and busses were looking more dilapidated and the prices were going up. The people were taken by an uncontrollable panic. They feared being left behind. We were down to mostly morose widows, grandmothers and children. Nightly gunshots and disturbances added to the fear of bandits and several times the security guards have shot into the darkness.

The hygiene in the camp had gone to zero. At the beginning the latrines were cleaned and disinfected twice daily; that had stopped and because of the small holes in the squat-style latrines there were feces all around the edges and occasionally they appeared in some unusual place like the shower....The only clean place was in the fields. One waited until night time of course. But what about the jittery security guards?

Food had gotten to an all time low. Half a loaf of bread a day per person, but there was still plenty of Nutella. The store room was practically empty except for some exotic canned vegetables which no one wanted. Those who still had gas and their little stove still worked make fried dough

(flour and water) with either sugar or salt sprinkled on top, but even these commodities were getting scarce.

Heidi's water-color painting turned out to be the best therapy of all. We recruited children from every tent and if they were shy, we would have the mothers come, too. Actually, Sadria, the mother with the three clinging children finally came, and she turned out to be very artistic, painting lovely flowers and naif plants. She painted meticulously slowly and used only one color per painting, but her drawings were exquisite. I detected several children who were naturally left-handed but who had been forced by their parents and then their teachers to use their right hand. After further investigation among the Albanian translators, I learned that left-handedness is still not accepted in the school system. One six year old left-hander painted everything upside down. At first all the children's drawings were imitations of Heidi's examples; then, after several days, she would suggest they draw whatever they felt like. Some just drew the letters UCK, pronounced UU-chi-ka (the Kosova Liberation Army), others repeated drawings from previous days and finally, one day, they took off and painted snow, snowmen and winter trees with no leaves. This was the climate when they left Kosova and probably their mothers were worrying about the coming winter, having to live in a tent with no heat, no hot water.

Days went by and still no really obvious signs of trauma emerged in the paintings. Finally, two days before the camp closing, almost unanimously, the children began to paint humans with anguished faces, they used bleak colors and black which they had consciously avoided until now and the lines were jagged and harsh. The very last day the mood changed to painting their roads and busses. They knew they would be going "home" tomorrow. They never painted the tents that they had lived in for over two months.

The Last Days. The census was down to 140 people. The tension in the camp was

very high. I made the rounds of the tents, knowing it might be the last opportunity, trying to crowd everything the women would need to keep themselves together psychologically over one intense cup of tea. We talked mostly about children's reactions to trauma, and I tried to reinforce the mine awareness that we had been pushing all along. In the discussion about traumatized children I encouraged parents to spend more time with their children, to be patient, to hold and caress them, affirm them, to let them sleep in the same bed if they have nightmares and so on. "But we always do that anyway," they responded and indeed, the Kosovars were very gentle and loving with their children who grow like wild flowers without much discipline. While they may lack the ordinary social graces that we expect from children, when it comes to getting help washing your clothes or carrying a bucket of water, the children scream with laughter at how weak I am and they insist on scrubbing my clothes, which they rinse incessantly until not a bubble is left in the bucket of water. Habits from washing in streams. All the children have "dishpan" hands from washing the dishes and clothes as soon as they are physically big enough. This was their chore. Their little hands were rough, dry and cracked and constantly red.

The news went around the camp at about 8 p.m. that several trucks and busses were supposed to appear in the camp the next morning at 8 a.m. to take everyone who was left "back home". Excitement verged on hysteria and no one slept all night. At dawn people started coming to the area in front of the infirmary, bringing all of their belongings with them. It was the hottest day of the summer and there was NO shade as the efficient Dutch engineer had made quick work of tearing down everyone's tent almost before they were out of it. No effort was made to distribute food, even though the refugees only had two loaves of bread per family for a two day journey (barring breakdowns). Of course, the shrewd ones, and those with money, had extra stores...the widows had nothing.

People squatted in the desert-hot sun waiting and gnawing at the bread and getting redder and redder. They began to get headaches, but the infirmary had already been dismantled. Soon, the children began fainting from heat exhaustion, then the mothers. Finally, at my insistence, the now empty infirmary was opened and the women in children were allowed to squat under a tin roof. The doctor couldn't resist a not so gentle reprimand telling them not to sit in the sun...I asked where he thought they should sit, but it was a wasted remark. He refused to give them anything for headache or motion-sickness, even though many of these people had rarely ridden in motorized vehicles in their lives and the roads were bumpy, curvy and mountainous. I did my best to comfort them and keep them drinking fluids.

The vehicles arrived around 2:30 PM. Great arguments in Albanian ensued about who was to go first and with what truck, but finally, by late afternoon we were waving off the last bus. It was sad and exciting at the same time. The Kosovars had clamored for this moment from day one, but when the moment finally came, they were suddenly frightened about what they would find. Many of them knew their houses had been burned but they didn't know for certain about their husbands and/or other family members. Perhaps it would be better to live in doubt, rather than have a negative certainty thrust upon them, so they could no longer say "maybe he's still alive..."

What will they find upon their return? For each family, for each individual, a different reality exists. The flood back to Kosova was almost as rapid as was the exodus. Sadly, the K-FOR (NATO forces in Kosova) and the international organizations misjudged this massive movement and were not in place to help the refugees with their reentry.

Albania and the Albanians...a postscript. Very obviously the Albanians are a people in search of their individual and collective identities. They are naively friendly and

naively think that the world is focusing attention on them because of the massive presence of international organizations in their country. But the sad truth is that the organizations came here to provide for the Kosovar refugees. Immediately following the mass exodus of the refugees, NATO and the organizations packed up and followed them to Kosova. Albania is in a shambles from years of neglect and institutional looting. This country weathered a fifty year dictatorship, under Enver Hoxha, that isolated the country from the rest of the world to emerge from communism into a socio-political anarchy. Too-good-to-be-true investment strategies that promoted pyramid economic schemes with incredible returns and rapid financial growth, proved to be just that - too good to be true. Many

people lost their life savings, others lost fortunes and who knows where the "winners" are. This first flirtation with capitalism caused a major civil war in 1992 during which the military arsenals were opened and weapons were put into the hands of near every civilian in the country. The government was toppled. [note: Sali here probably refers to the post-pyramid schemes unrests bordering on civil war of 1997, which drove the government out of power and returned the former communists in a landslide, though disputed, election victory the same year - ed.] Since that time, the law in Albania is the law of the streets, and the Albanian people are once more isolated from the rest of the world, this time economically, intellectually and even ideologically.





shutka - a living and learning experience

Alana McConnon, Sunflowers volunteer in Shutka, Macedonia, July-August 1999

Shutka is a community of Roma people in Skopje, Macedonia. In conjunction with Homos, the Roma community's own humanitarian organisation, Balkan Sunflowers has established a project for the children and youth of the community and Roma refugees from Kosovo who are now living there. The aim of the project is to provide opportunities for the children and youth to come into contact with people from other nationalities, to learn a foreign language and to have fun!

The first project of three weeks began in the beginning of July with English lessons for about 40 children. By the time we, the second group of international volunteers, arrived the number of English classes doubled and the timetable also included dance and art classes as well as organised games and activities outside in the playground. Children responded as children everywhere do with curiosity and enthusiasm. The presence of a group of international people in their community certainly sparked curiosity and interest.

How to describe Shutka? Quite simply it is a community where old traditions blend with new, where there is individuality as well as a very strong sense of family and community unity. At present there are about 40000 inhabitants. Living standards vary, as with most communities anywhere, from very comfortable houses with all the modern conveniences to the most basic single-room huts constructed from whatever materials were at hand at the time and often with no running water. There is a colourful street bazaar and produce market, several small independent market shops and a promenade called 'Little Paris' where you just have to be seen! Several of the residents have spent some time living in other European countries or have relatives living there who come back to Shutka to visit during the summer.

Cultural traditions run strongly throughout the community. There is rarely a day go by without at least one fiesta happening. Everyone, horses and carts, buses, taxis and pedestrians stop as a procession slowly passes through the streets of Shutka. Roma women, often dressed in traditional sparkling costumes, lead the ever present brass bands with their special style of dance that try as I might I could not imitate. Processions occur for every occasion, weddings, circumcisions, birthdays, anniversaries or possibly for no special reason. Whatever the occasion everyone has a great time. The music from the band stays with you long after the procession has finally reached the destination - a playing field or a street blocked by tables of food and drink - there they continue to dance and play music into the night.

To work and live in this community, albeit for a very short time, was invaluable in reminding oneself of the importance of enjoying and celebrating life. On the other hand, however, it was also a sobering experience as it was apparent that many many people live there, as in a lot of places, under very difficult circumstances. The expectations of hard but rewarding work both mentally and physically were met. At times it felt as if it just wasn't enough, although their responses were always so positive and they were so receptive to almost everything that we did with them.

But is it enough to just have fun playing with the kids in their own environment? What was important was to be a positive influence and to give some personal attention where there may not have been any previously. The challenges of being involved in a different culture, that is, of living a different way of life, coping with the cultural and language differences, as well as learning from the culture itself had to be met by us as volunteers. It was tough at

times witnessing different approaches to problem solving. An important reminder about accepting other ways of dealing with problems not necessarily of our own personal choice. This is not unique to living in the Roma community it applies equally to almost any other community in the world. A way to improve this is to show by example alternative approaches.

We were involved in teaching English to several groups of students from four to sixteen years of age and a few adults. But playing with the children outside in the hot summer sun was where we felt we were doing something really positive. We played favourites such as basketball, volleyball and football and we exchanged game ideas. The children very eagerly taught us their favourite games and they learnt games from us that we used to play at school in our home countries. Sometimes we just "hung out" together communicating in a crazy language combination of English-Roma-Macedonian-German and Croatian learning the Capueira, singing songs and laughing lots.

The children had their own code of behaviour in the playground, an instance of stealing, cheating, or aggressive or unfair play was not tolerated. They accepted and respected the introduction of the "everybody plays" rule and also "everyone will get a turn in turn" - no one was excluded from having fun. It was really great to see them implement these rules themselves after a very short time, in particular the children who had initially found it hard to play with the others because of their aggressive behaviour.

A pattern emerged after the first week that the majority of the children playing outside were not those who attended the English lessons. Many of the English students had been exposed to either learning a foreign language or English itself when they had lived with their parents in another European country such as Germany or Italy. These children were familiar with the classroom and learning. Most studied very hard to make fantastic progress with their

English by the end of the three week period. The children in the playground however were less used to the classroom environment but they were curious. Faces peered through the window to see what was going on, bodies climbed through the window in some instances to join in. The early morning young children's class became a bit chaotic at times but we all had fun and learned something, the serious students and the 'visitors'.

The last class of the day with the teenagers also changed focus. After successfully inviting some thirteen and fourteen year old boys from the playground into the lessons in the second week it was revealed that their educational experiences were not of the same level as those of children younger than themselves. Most likely due to non attendance at school over the years. On seeing their discomfort and confusion it was decided that they needed some extra attention but how? A visit to a nearby ice cream shop proved a good decision where a poster of South American actress Cassandra was the attraction not the ice cream itself: "Are we going to see Cassandra today?" One of these lessons went along the lines of:

"What is it?" (pointing to objects in the shop)
"It is a table...It is a chair...It is Cassandra."
"Is it a picture?"
"No, it is Cassandra."

Well you couldn't argue with that could you? Although the 'lessons' would never make up the deficit of missed years of education at least those five boys could feel good about learning something new. Even if the pronunciation of thirty three will be a mystery to them! Therefore the English lessons became a medium for improving confidence and general cognitive skills and the learning of a foreign language a secondary aim.

At the conclusion of our group's three weeks all the students received a certificate marking their achievement in learning



English. For some it was their progress which was rewarded, for others it was their motivation and determination to take on something that may have been beyond their immediate capability that was rewarded. In either case there were a lot of very proud students at the certificate ceremony.

As could be expected leaving was hard for us, some special relationships had been developed amongst the volunteers and the children. But how about the children? How were they feeling? How many times had they got to know someone, maybe trust

them and then be left alone again? But wait a new bunch of *volunteers* has just arrived full of energy and commitment to give these children something special. To have fun with them, give them the opportunity to find out a little more about others outside of the Roma community and Macedonia, and in some small way to give them a sense of empowerment and achievement. It was a living and learning experience on both sides, one that I sincerely hope is repeated many times.



bathore

Devil Stick Peat, Clown, juggler and balkan sunflower

Ever wondered were the entertainers go in the winter? Here's what I've been up to, as told in my own unique style.

BATHORE. I was laying on the ground, curled up like a ball, trying to protect my manhood. Around me, children were hitting, kicking and fighting each other, all trying to get to me. And the ones who got to me where really going mad, scratching, biting, punching, gouging, anything to get at my balloons. Luckily for me, our 2 translators had both served in the army during the civil unrest. So they knew how to handle the situation, they just waded in and threw the kids off of me. John helped me up to my feet and dusted me off. "are you ok"? he asked I was bruised and shaken, my head hung to one side and hurt. "I can't move my head" I said. John saw the cause of the problem and removed the 5 year old who was hanging from my hair with one hand, the other was busy trying to get into my pocket.

I had come to the Balkans with Children's World International, a new NGO: formed by Lady Arabella Churchill. We were going to spend 1 week in Albania, followed by 3 weeks in Kosova, we lived with a NGO: called Balkan Sunflowers. And this was one of their other projects. It was my first ever time in sector 6, Bathore, Albania. and that night, as I sat on the balcony of the house, smoking a cigarette. I thought about the history of the place and the people. With the fall of communism, all land returned to its original owners. This and the state owned farms going bankrupt caused a major influx of internal migrants. Most of them headed for the capital, Tirana, and ended up living on a old state farm called Bathore. Bathore has somewhere between 25 and 30 thousand inhabitants living in 9 sectors. The poorest sector is sector 6. Here around 2000 people (over half of them, under 19) live in the remains of cattle sheds built to house 800

cows. There're no toilets, no sewer, no clean water and very little hope. The hospital for these people is a 8 foot by 20 foot metal box. The type that workmen in England use to keep tools in.

Madeline (a young American girl) came out to speak to me. "Well, what did you think of Bathore"? she asked "They scared me" I replied. She nodded sagely as I continued to talk. "I've never been scared by kids before! Over 13 years I've worked with problem kids, and these are the first ones to ever actually scare me. It was brilliant!!!!!!!!!!!! I've never felt anything like it"

"You ENJOYED it"? She asked in surprise

"You don't understand. In all that time I've never felt real fear. These are the only kids who'd ever done that. And that makes them so special, it really does. Tell me more, I want to know Why they're like that"? Madeline's face took on a different look as she realized she'd found a fellow ally in her fight for these kids. Her eyes shone and a big grin appeared on her lips.

"Look" she said "It isn't their thought. Poverty isn't just lack of money. Its lack of hope, lack of self respect. Its drug and alcohol abuse. Its violence, both social and domestic, and it's the kids who suffer. If they'd been born in England, they'd be doctors and lawyers, but they weren't. They were born here. We handed out blankets in Bathore the other week. It was all arranged with the village elder, Fatmir. We turned up, entered the warehouse, and tried to get the people to line up. NO CHANCE: They were fighting each other to get as many blankets as possible. We ended up locked inside the warehouse as guns were fired outside!!!!!!!!!!!! These are the parents, the people those kids look up to. The ones who teach them the social rules of life. Is it any wonder that they'd kill you for a balloon"?

"So what do we do about it? How do we teach them another way"? I asked

"We lead by example, and that example is love" 3 hours latter, we were still sitting on the balcony, talking when Jamie McGoblin (an amazing clown) come out.

"Peat" he said "your grinning like a idiot and your eyes have the look of a religious fanatic. Don't get involved, we're only here for a few days" It was true. Children's World International were only in Tirana for a week. Then we were off to Kosov@ to work with the kids there, but these kids, arrrrrr these sweet violent kids, it was to late, I was hooked. I went there maybe 5 times and got punched in the "you know what", robbed and threatened with a knife. I loved it. 3 months latter, I was back in Albania. This time as a Balkan Sun-Flower. It had taken 3 days and was so tired I could hardly keep my eyes open. I was shown to a dorm and laid down to sleep. Someone entered the room. "Hey, Sari", they said to a friend "come on, Its time to go to Bathore". I was wide awake again. "Can I come too"? I asked As the minibus took us there all the old memories returned to me and I wondered if the kids would remember me. Probably not I thought, and if they do, they might resent me for abandoning them. The minibus pulled up and we got out. I'd taken 3 steps and then heard my name being called. A kid came running up to hug me, another was making juggling motions to a friend. The little..... Darlings remembred me. I think that's when I fell in love with them. Officially I had come back to work on a Mine And Weapon Awareness Campaign called M:A:W:A:T: but Bathore had become my love. Every spare moment I had was spent there. I couldn't believe the difference in these kids They had stopped hitting us (although there was a incident with a hand grenade, but he was just showing off). They didn't rob us so often, They were interacting with each other WITHOUT violence. We were wining. By leading by example we were making a difference. Then Sari (the Australian coordinator of the project) said that she was

leaving to travel elsewhere in the Balkans. This left us with a problem. Who was going to take it over. I spoke with Leentja, our boss here. "I've thought and thought about it" I said "and I can't think of anyone here who can take it over"

"Well let's take a look at it" she said, and we sat down at the computer. She typed everyone's name into the computer and 1 by 1 we went through them, deleting the names as we found a reason why they couldn't do it.

"You see" I said, looking at a now blank screen. "There's no-one left to do it"

"There is one name I forgot to write on the screen" she said. I looked at her and realized that she had a strange smile on her face. I'd got to know her well enough by now to hate and fear that smile. It meant "you ain't going to like this, but I will". Still I couldn't think of who she meant, then the coin dropped. "Oh no" I said "no way, not me, I'm to busy with M:A:W:A:T:; I haven't the time, I've never done any thing like it before, NO WAY". The next week I took over the project. Organizing the team. Who works where, are they safe etc. One of my first jobs was to get the tent back up and running. One of the kids had cut the ropes over christmas, and the whole thing had collapsed. The tent was given to us my UNICEF and was important as it was the only place to play when the weather was bad. Fatmir (the village elder) sent 4 older boys to help me, but they didn't, they just stood and watched. Then Elson, Fatmir's youngest son came and helped. He's only 4 or 5 years old and more of a nuisance than anything, but he tried. We spent 4 hours putting up that tent and by the end of it we were good friends. You shouldn't have favorites in this trade, but we all do, and mine was Elson. He would approach every problem with the mentality of the incredible hulk. e.g. use enough strength and it will move, if it doesn't, use more strength. I spent a total of two and a half months working with those kids. Each day my love and respect for them just grew and grew. I got to know names and char-

acters. To win their respect as a person. Then the brown stuff hit the fan. I'd known since I first got there that we had money troubles. Now we had no more money. The projects had to close. On our last day in Bathore I had a talk with my team. "We don't know what the mood will be today. It might be that they will act normal, it might be that they will try to rob everything before we leave. What ever the mood, we have to smile, NO TEARS. We leave in a happy, positive mood. We have to for their sake". Like I said earlier, they had improved so much since I first met them, but even so, this day they were so well behaved. There were only 2 fights, and they were only little ones. It just made saying goodbye even harder. As we walked out of Bathore for the last time, a little girl came up to my interpreter and said that she'd like to say something to me. This girl (aged around 13) hates men, especially men in authority. I stood there expecting her to say F!k you or something, instead she sang a song, for me. Till the day I die I'll never know how I managed to walk out of there with dry eyes, but I did. Four days after the project closed I was on my way home for a months leave. As soon as I got there I started to raise funds for Bathore. Then I got the worst e-mail of my life. Our country coordinator told me that she had decided not to look for funding for the project, instead we were going to concentrate on M:A:W:A:T: I believe in M:A:W:A:T:. I have to. I helped to write it, but to stop the play group!!!!!!!!!!!!!! These kids have nothing. Over 1200 people living in rundown cattle sheds, built for 800 cows, every child there is ill because of poisoned water. They have no future, no hope, no nothing!!!!!! I couldn't believe that we went going to look for funding, it was crazy. One month latter, I was back in Albania. This time I was to help to run a big show for MAWAT, where the kids would have a chance to tell the world what they want for the future, then I was to go to Macedonia to work with the gipsy kids there. I helped with the show (which went well) but in my spare time I was in Bathore, talking with Fatmir, telling him what I was doing to get us back there.

At the same time that the MAWAT show finished the international meeting of BSF was due to start in Kosova. This was a big meeting of All the big names in BSF. I was offered the chance to go and jumped at the offer, it was the chance I needed to fight for Bathore. It took over 10 hours in a minibus to get over the mountains, a lovely tripe that offers great views of all the minibus's that slipped, off the road and down, down down, into the valleys below. Not a trip for the faint hearted. At the meeting I tried to state my case for Bathore, and why we need to be there. I was tiered from the journey the day before and couldn't think straight, I remember thinking that Id messed up the only chance those kids had. Then, during a tea break a woman came up to me with tears in her eyes. "I've never been to Bathore" she said, "but the way you spoke about it was beautiful, we'll go back there, we will". She was our international coordinator, the one who decides who works where. Several other people came up to me over the next week and pledged their support for Bathore, I felt a bit more confident. It was agreed that there should be a change of plan. Instead of going to Macedonia, I was to go back to Tirana for a week, to tie up some loose strings and do some work on Bathore. After this I was to tour around all our projects in all the countries, teaching games etc. I took the bus back over the mountains (again) and spent a week in Tirana. My time was divided between sitting in front of the computer, updating reports on Bathore and trying to write a project proposal to get us funding. (I've never tried to write one before, this and the fact that I'm dislex..... deslax..... deslix..... I cant spell, made it a daunting task) and trying to find other N.G.O.'s to work there.

One N.G.O. called "enfants du monde" arranged for a children's doctor to go there. He arranged to spend 2 hours there, he stayed at least 6, at the end of which he'd seen over 150 children and still couldn't find one that wasn't sick. The main cause of the illness's there is the water, it's poisoned and polluted and horrid. He now goes there every week and Franko (the

director of Enfants du monde) is sorting out a fresh water supply for Bathore. Then, my time up, I went over the mountains, back to Kosova, and my next job. For a month I worked on project shake up, teaching my way of playing and why it works. Then, it was time to take one last trip over the mountains to Tirana, where I would take a plane home, to England. Again I traveled over the mountains, but this time I took a different route. At one point we came to a ferry that sailed the length of a dam. I'd never been this way before, never seen this dam before, but all the same, the moment I saw it, I knew it. It took 3 hours to cruise the length of the dam, so I just sat on the top deck and watched the views. For 8 years I had no home. I just traveled around Europe, my pack on my back. In the day time I would busk on the streets, making money as a clown and juggler. At night I would party on Mediterranean beaches under warm, moonlight skies. I've woken up to see the sun rise over alpine mountains. Sleep in lovely green woods. Seen the sun set into the sea so often, it seemed like nothing special. But this place. Its truly a sight worth seeing. If we could see rather than hear love songs, this place, with its green slopes and stark, grey cliffs, would be the greatest love song ever, it really would. Years ago, Fatmir lived on a farm in the north of Albania. He said it was a beautiful farm set in some of the most beautiful mountains in Albania. Then, one day a man from the government came along and told all the farmers that they had to build a wall at the end of the valley. When the wall was built the farmers were told to pack up and leave as the wall was part of a new dam. Fatmir and his people had no choice, they left those most wondrous and clean valleys and ended up in Bathore, and shit. We sailed where eagles once flew, but all the time I couldn't get rid of the sadness that filled my heart. To think that this Eden, this paradise was not only lost to Fatmir and co, but replaced by Bathore. It just doesn't seem fair. I arrived in Tirana for the last time. One more week here and then I was off home. I met with the new country coordinators and answered their questions on Bathore. They

told me that they wanted to start up work there again, but differently this time. They wanted to run circus schools and art class's etc. I agreed with them but told them that these things should come 2nd. You cant build the 1st floor until you've built the foundations. In this case the play group. They weren't to happy with this so I arranged to take them up there, to see Bathore for themselves. It had been arranged with another N.G.O. that on international children's day, I would perform at a school in another part of Bathore. I took our new country coordinators with me. After the show we went to sector 6. The part of Bathore where I worked. By the end of the day, they agreed with me, you cant have the specialist class's without something that every kid can join in with, otherwise they'd be jalousie and wreck it.

People from the international meeting kept their word and found us 4 months funding, to pay rent, food etc. and my time was fast running out. I had to go home. At last the day came for me to fly back to England. Elson wanted to come with me and cried when I said no. I didn't cry, I didn't have to. I'd done what I set out to do. I'd got the project restarted, all we need now is the money to carry on. Not just money to spend on the kids stuff (pens, paint, paper to draw on etc) but money to keep our office open, e.g. rent, food, phone bill etc. And that's why I've just spent 2 dyslexic days in front of this bloody computer, typing, swearing and screaming. In the hope that YOU, like me, feel the need to make a difference, the need to leave YOUR mark on this planet. If I'm right, and you do, then please send your donations to
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balkan sunflowers: an alternative approach to development,

The experiences of an international volunteer in retrospect.

Kasper Hoffman, Gjakova 2000-2001

It was the first summer of the new millennium, and I had recently returned to my country of origin, Denmark, from a journey in South America. I was about to commence my post-graduate programme: Public Administration and Social Sciences at Roskilde Universitycenter. However I was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with this choice of direction, and I wasn't sure which other direction to take.

A dear friend of mine, a lawyer by profession, was working, with UNMIK, in judicial affairs, she encouraged me to come to Kosovo, for a unique professional experience. I gracefully, and not without a certain amount of nervousness, accepted her proposition and embarked on what was to be the greatest experience/adventure of my life. Initially I worked with the OSCE in the 2000 Municipal Elections, which were the first democratic elections of the province, as a *Voter's List Verification Officer*, which in itself was a significant challenge. My contract with the OSCE was short-term however, and the contract ended in the beginning of November, and I was to make a crucial choice: should I stay in Kosovo or should I go back to Denmark? I decided to stay and look to deepen my experience in Kosovo, which turned out to be the best and most important conscious decision of my life.

As I systematically, went through the list of approximately 300 international NGO's operating in Kosovo at this time, looking for a possible employer, I was intrigued by an NGO with the uncharacteristically unsolemn name of *Balkan Sunflowers* (BSF). BSF was and still is, a volunteer organisation, and thus far I had had no luck finding a job after OSCE, and BSF was the first organisation to respond to my application.

From studying the legend of UN-map of Prishtina I discovered that its headquarters laid beyond the limits of downtown

Prishtina, the dynamic and visible power-container of the international community in Kosovo, this gave away the first hint that BSF wasn't an NGO like the other NGO's. Instead BSF's headquarter was situated in the suburban and humble suburb Bregu I Diellit (Sunny Hill) on the outskirts of Prishtina. As I approached Sunny Hill, with one of the unavoidable *combis*, (taxi-vans) for the interview, with a certain Rand Engel, I immediately recognized the unesthaetical style of the large habitation projects which dominates the periphery of any city of the former communist Eastern European countries. Large concrete blocks had been constructed in response to the increasing urbanisation and state-induced industrialisation, which had required habitation for the emerging modern labour force, were organized in rows on the steepish hills of Bregu I Diellit. Now industrialisation had halted, and the failure of the integration and unification of the Yugoslav state and nation is an all too well known fact which performed its spectacle with a rusty and decaying moan in Sunny Hill too. Here and there in the interstices open containers were spilling thrash or billowing a dense black smoke from the smouldering fire within, trash lay littered everywhere along the streets – a testimony to an insufficient infrastructure, and there was an intense activity of the everyday life of suburban Kosovars, whose existences weaved in and out of a modern and traditional condition respectively. Small scale vendors served as a modest replacement of the ambitious Leninist heavy industry and dominated the visible economic life – suburban Prishtina had just begun another attempt of transition to modern life after a decade of harsh rule by an unforgiving constabulary – the only remaining source of authority for the incumbent Yugoslav regime, an epoch often referred to as *Apartheid* by *Kosovo-Albanians*, only this time it was fuelled by the hopes and aspirations of the, now hegemonic discourse, of

liberal western democracy which *had not* lost the Cold War.

The sweeping interpellation of the Kosovars by the might of Occidental morality and ethics is evident everywhere in Prishtina, but it is nowhere better illustrated than in the skyline of Sunny Hill where satellite dishes abound, relaying the seductive splendours and excesses of the West to the imagination of a, no doubt, willing populace, in the hope that this time the inclusion of this peripheral province into Europe and Modern Life will be less traumatisingly schizophrenic than the last one.

It was then, on my first visit to Sunny Hill, I realised that for the first time I was among ordinary Kosovars, and it was here BSF had chosen to place their headquarters, for economic as well as ideological reasons, as *friends and neighbours* of the Kosovars (BSF motto). It was a stunning difference from my previous image of the international community, augmented by my work with the OSCE, as a massive network of rationalistic governmentalities and a monopoly on the legitimate apparatus of violence, that were incessantly carving out a new centralized *raison d'état* modelled from western bureaucracy and efficacy in the guise of the UN, OSCE and KFOR, supported by the equally impressive *field-work* of literally hundreds of international NGO's.

As the focus shifted from *emergency-relief* to *development*, (the latter often used as if it has no *politico-ideological* significance and as if development occurs along a predestined linear evolutionary trajectory analogous to a Western/Christian notion of *time*) the Kosovars followed suit to the best of their ability but the apartheid regime of the preceding decade hadn't stimulated the sort of competences needed to participate in modern governance, nor had the ancient but still effective social structures of a segmentary clan-structure done much to facilitate a smooth "development" into a functional highly differentiated modern state.

The BSF office was tucked away on the 5th floor in a small apartment, not visible from the street, with a discrete poster portraying the trademark sunflower on the door. I wondered: was this really the headquarters of an international NGO? BSF did not display the sort of symbolic power and dominance that I had become accustomed too. A stroll down the main street in downtown Prishtina provides a stunning realization of the accumulated symbolic power and authority displayed by the international community; perhaps best illustrated by the proverbial powerful, brilliantly white, 4-wheel drives parked on both sides on the entire length of the main street, used by NGO's and IGO's alike. International police officers wearing a striking plethora of colourful uniforms were easily recognizable everywhere, all significant government buildings had been occupied by the OSCE and UN agencies alike. The pricey bungalows overseeing the city-center were hired out either as the headquarters of NGO's or as housing for wealthy officials, policemen or otherwise engaged members of the international community. Everywhere you turned the structure of the relations of power were evident, a new elite, consisting of the members of the international community, had seen the light of day in present day Kosovo, literally from one day to another.

During the interview with Rand Engel, I realised, that BSF's activities was centered on children and youths and that it worked in a radically different way and at a different level, and that all the projects that had been realised had been so through the efforts of literally hundreds of international volunteers, often students or recently graduated professionals, and the track record was impressive. Rand and I agreed that Gjakova, a town in the South Eastern part of the province, which was almost entirely Albanian, would be the best place for me to go. When I first arrived at the BSF house in Gjakova, with another new volunteer, an Argentinian, the volunteers were in Kolonija, a nearby Roma community, situated at the town's garbage dump for the celebration of the baptism of a

baby-girl. As time went by I learned that it was this sort of intimate contact and solidarity with the locals that characterised the activities of BSF.

When I met the experienced volunteers and ex-volunteers for the first time that evening, in late November 2000, I listened, with intent, to their stories of the projects they had realised, and life as a volunteer. I was literally in awe of what they had achieved, which gave a tremendous motivational impetus and I realised that they had left an enormous heritage for us new volunteers to lift. Under the conditions and with the means at their disposal, what they had achieved was nothing short of extraordinary. As time went by I slowly realised what this substance of exceptionality consisted of and I yearned to continue the legacy of BSF in Kosovo. First of all, if you believe, the real measure of any NGO's is the reception of the people or the segment that it wishes to serve or aid, BSF excelled. Everywhere I turned the Kosovars extolled the activities of BSF in Gjakova. Secondly, the international community had monitored, supported and financed the work of BSF with a mixture of curiosity and admiration as well. Thirdly, turning to the internal dynamics of BSF I realised that in the reciprocity of the concepts of *volunteerism*, *collectivism* were enshrined the unique melange of a strong work-ethic and *esprit-de-corps* that characterised life as a BSF-volunteer, augmented by the living conditions of the volunteers. As much as 15 volunteers would live and work in the same house, sharing facilities and experiences daily, though this was often challenging, even excruciating at times, this provided the necessary basics of collective life as an international BSF-volunteer. Fourthly, with BSF nothing seemed impossible: In principle you could formulate any project you wanted as a volunteer, but the project in question would have to be recognised and authorised intersubjectively amongst the volunteers in the BSF-house, and later by BSF headquarters in Prishtina and ultimately by donors, which eliminated unqualified and irresponsible project proposals. The importance of volunteerism

can hardly be exaggerated. It is the cornerstone of the cost-efficient activities unique to BSF and at the same time it ensures that only truly motivated individuals join the ranks of BSF rather than individuals lured into development by the notoriously high salaries. Voluntarism, collectivism and solidarity constituted the idealistic tissue constitutive for the culture of the organisation. At first I had the impression that the organisation was more dependent on strong charismatic leaders than other organisation since it didn't have the bureaucratic resources and systemic continuity of wealthier and conventional organisations, and the thus more vulnerable to personnel changes, now, when the organisation has just celebrated its 4-year anniversary in Kosovo, I'm sure I was wrong in this appreciation of the question of competent leadership. Rather I find that the fundamental values and structure of the organisation, previously described, *ensures* operational continuity as well as a visionary, creative approach to developmental problematiques. Personally I found that the atmosphere literally blew me away and subsequently prompted me to enter into a veritable working frenzy, not because I had to, but because I couldn't stop and which no salary could pay me to do. The rewards were ample, notably the gratitude and close friendships I formed with several Kosovars and the everyday contact with "vulnerable children" (children who had lost either or both parents during the 1999 war or minorities, in the case of Gjakova this was the Roma community) which was the target-group of the projects we did in Gjakova at the time. From countless talks with fellow volunteers I can safely say that this wasn't an experience unique to me.

I found that learning to live as *friends* and *neighbours*, and the same time working efficiently as *colleagues*, *internationals* and eventually *manager/employer* with the Kosovars was without a shadow of a doubt the most difficult part of volunteering in Kosovo. How can you simultaneously be the icon of the New Order and pretend to be friends with Kosovars on equal terms? In

my opinion, with the way the current, self-referential, discourse and praxis of international development is configured this is an unsolvable paradox. According to this, "we", *the developers*, represent a superior form of societal organisation with a more efficient mode of production (capitalist) that have granted us the human and material resources to act as donors of ideas and material resources to "them", the recipient inferior *undeveloped* cultures. On this background, images of Western Life, is reapplied and canonised in the *developing* culture as cultural fetishes under the auspices of the body of discourse referred to as international development. This creates an unavoidable asymmetric composition of power relations and division between "locals" and "internationals", and it is my experience that this carries over into the day-to-day activities and management of even a small scale NGO like BSF. Nevertheless I found that the way BSF operated, not only curtailed, but ameliorated this overarching structural and fundamental division between "internationals" and "locals".

How did BSF attain this? The most important aspect, in my opinion, is the cardinal ideological principle of *solidarity*. Solidarity with the Kosovars is exemplified by the insistence on avoiding the display of symbolic and material superiority, which creates palpable collective inferiority complexes on behalf of the recipients, and which reproduces the, almost supreme, structural dominance of internationals over locals. This in turn had the effect that the Kosovars, hired by BSF remained fiercely loyal to BSF, and the projects that were being realised, despite the fact they were being paid significantly less money, more or less corresponding to the local salary-level, than local staff employed with richer NGO's. This is not to say that conflicts between internationals and locals did not exist, on the contrary. What it does mean though is that when conflicts did occur it wasn't automatically assumed that the internationals were right and the locals were wrong, instead what BSF did was to take a given conflict as a *signifier* of deeper problems in the structural organisation of a

given project and work-environment of the BSF-house. In this way the realisation of the problem generated a new *alternate* approach which rectified and corrected previous misconceptions and communicative misunderstandings. This was important since this manner of operating created mutual respect and a responsive non-linear approach to development that facilitated "bottom-up"-style development, where the locals themselves in close collaboration with the international volunteers define the objectives of a given project. This is necessary to avoid an international monologue and a subsequent one-way *upwards accountability* in which the local community is given a stringent course of action dictated by inflexible doctrines. I believe Balkan Sunflowers on crucial points transgress the problems of orthodox development with its framework of volunteerism, collectivism and solidarity and that within it is consecrated the opportunity for a culturally sensitive developmental trajectory which is connected to the existing *real* social fabric on the ground; thus the *idealism* of BSF is not in opposition to *realistic* development – instead I find that BSF avoids the feared mal-development, where a given project or programme for seemingly inexplicable reasons doesn't seem to follow the linear development it was supposed to.

Now, precisely two years after my departure from Kosovo I'm in the final year of International Development studies as a direct consequence of my experiences in Kosovo. About half-way through my 1-year stay in Kosovo I was sure I wanted to work and research within the field of international development. The current critique of "modernist" and "liberalist" approaches to development, within continental discourse at least, has confirmed my firm belief that the methods applied by BSF represent a refreshing and effective alternative approach to development.

When I came in Kosovo, I came for an interesting professional experience; I got that, but I received so much more than that, but what I would like to point out is that I left as an *idealist*, a person who had re-

ceived the necessary motivational stimulus to shape an entire life around development; one who's willing to pay the price, *if*, I find the approach to development responsible – such as that of Balkan Sunflowers.

Thank you for your attention
Kasper Hoffmann



3 Wochen freiwilligeneinsatz bei kosovoflüchtlingen

Heidi Superina: Albanien im Juni 1999

Hallo, ich bin Heidi aus der Schweiz, ich möchte mit Kindern arbeiten, d.h. spielen und malen. Ich bin Kindergärtnerin mit Malthherapie-Ausbildung, spreche Deutsch, Englisch, Italienisch, etc. - und ganz wenig Albanisch.

So spontan und unkompliziert ist es, eine Volunteer bei www.balkansunflowers.org zu werden und innert einer Woche im Einsatzgebiet Albanien einzutreffen und sofort mit der Arbeit zu beginnen. "Kommst Du mit, wir gehen zum Rotary Club": ein Hochhaus-Neubau im Rohzustand voll, voll, voll mit Kindern, Frauen jeden Alters und Grossvätern, alle aus Kosovo, aus Dörfern rings um Prizren, einer Gegend, wo sehr viele Häuser, ja ganze Dörfer zerstört sind. Wer Lust hat, geht mit einem Freiwilligen auf einen öffentlichen Platz zum Ballspiel, wir spielen und zeichnen mit einer bunt zusammen gewürfelten Kinderschar auf einer gedeckten Terrasse. Ein 5-jähriges Mädchen umklammert plötzlich meine Beine und lässt mich nicht mehr los. Die Mutter will mich befreien, will das Mädchen loslassen, unmöglich. Ich lasse das Kind gewähren, streichle über seine Haare, spreche ruhig und liebevoll und nach einiger Zeit kann das Kind sich lösen. Das war mein erstes Erlebnis mit "Kriegstrauma", das bisher für mich ein leeres Wort war. Die ganzen Zweifel und das Infragestellen von Hilfe, wie ich dies vor meiner Abreise in der Schweiz, erlebt hatte, waren wie weggewischt

Sonntag, ein freier Tag. Gut, ich fahre nach Vlora um eine Kosovafamilie zu besuchen, deren Söhne in der Schweiz sind. Abfahrt des öffentlichen Buses 8.00, Ankunft 11.30, Rückfahrt um 17.00. Das ist klar und deutlich, für eine Schweizerin ganz normal. Dieser Ausflug war die beste Einführung in albanische Realitäten. Auf der Albanien-Landkarte gibt es eine prächtig eingezeichnete rote Strasse, die durch ganz Albanien führt. Realität: ein

breiter Feldweg, aber dafür mit rasantem Verkehr von wackligen Lastwagen, riesigen Hilfstransportern aus ganz Europa, uralten Busen, Rotkreuzautos, furchterregende Ueberholmanöver von Sammeltaxis, alte Mercedes (wurde der wohl regulär gekauft ???), auf dem Land vollbepackte Esel und Eselskarren. Um 11.30 frage ich, wie weit wir noch von Vlora entfernt seien. "Wir sind ca. auf halber Wegstrecke", um 3 Uhr waren wir da, eine Rückreise am gleichen Tag war gar nicht mehr möglich.

Und wovon leben denn die albanischen Menschen? Ich fahre durch das halbe Land: Keine Fabrik funktioniert, die Raffinerie, die Phosphatförderung, die Salzgewinnung sind stillgelegt, Olivenbäume und ein wenig Tomaten, idyllische Landwirtschaft, 95% aller Güter werden importiert, ein wenig Handel hier, ein wenig Handel dort, vielleicht kann man anstatt der abgemachten 200 Lek auch 300 Lek herausdiskutieren Ich komme im Bus mit einer gebildeten Albanerin ins Gespräch, (ihr Mann war Theaterdirektor, aber der Staat hat kein Geld), sie will mir helfen die Kosovofamilie zu finden. Sie lädt mich zu ihrer Familie ein, es gibt sofort herrlich griechisch/albanisches Essen, wir sitzen wie altbekannte Freunde zusammen und als sie sehen, dass mein Zeitplan tüchtig gelitten hat, bringen sie mich zum Aufenthaltsort der "Sunflowers" und beruhigen mich: "Du bist so weit her gekommen, um unserm Volk zu helfen, da ist es unsere selbstverständliche Pflicht, Deine Kosovafamilie zu finden."

Vlora, - wo ist denn da die heimatliche Angst vor der Mafia (natürlich gibt es sie) und die Unsicherheit vor gesundheitlichen Risiken geblieben? (In Tirana pumpen wir jeden Abend viele Flaschen Wasser von Hand durch einen Filter, um Trinkwasser zu erhalten). Ich mache die wunderbare Erfahrung, dass ich von allen Menschen, die mir begegnen, familiär aufgenommen und

dadurch auch geschützt werde, das ist für Albaner selbstverständlich. Welchen Wochentag haben wir heute, welches Datum? Keine Ahnung, hat jemand einen Kalender gesehen? Schauen wir doch im Internet nach! Nach 3 Tagen hört mein Tagebuch auf - das Leben im Hier und Jetzt ist spannender!

Nach einigen Tagen Lager-Einführung in Tirana und Umgebung schickt uns Wam, der Chef der Organisation, zum Einsatz in das Camp des Belgisch/Holländischen Roten Kreuzes, in der Nähe von Vlora. Die Zelte sind an einem terrassierten Hügel reihenweise aufgestellt. Trotzdem die Kosovaren das Leben in Zelten eher negativ bewerten, bietet es den grossen Vorteil, dass Familienstrukturen erhalten bleiben und die Flüchtlinge selber kochen können.

Wir werden von Christina, der Sozialarbeiterin des Roten Kreuzes empfangen. Im Zeltlager gibt es jetzt, eine Woche nachdem die Bombardierungen der Nato aufgehört haben, ca. 700 Flüchtlinge, darunter etwa 500 Kinder, kaum Männer. Man hat noch mehr Flüchtlinge erwartet, die dann nicht mehr kamen, deshalb können wir uns Zelte zum Wohnen und zum Arbeiten aussuchen. Das Wasser wird zentral aufbereitet und kontrolliert. Es gibt eine sehr gute I. Hilfe-Station mit einem Arzt. Das Lager wird Tag und Nacht von albanischen Polizisten bewacht, das gibt den Flüchtlingen Sicherheit. Die Flüchtlinge kommen alle aus Dörfern um Peje, Mitrovice, Skenderaj, Suhareke, Istog, Prizren. "Und das muss Euch klar sein", erläuterte Christina, "es gibt kein Kind im Lager, das nicht mindestens miterlebt hat, wie die Familie bedroht wurde, innert kürzester Zeit das heimatliche Dorf zu verlassen. Es gibt kein Kind, das nicht Tote am Wegrand hat liegen sehen. Diejenigen Kinder, die das Schlimmste erlebt haben, die mitangesehen haben, wie z.B. ihr Bruder erschossen wurde, werdet ihr kaum sehen, denn sie kommen nicht aus ihrem Zelten heraus. Die meisten Frauen haben keine Ahnung, wo ihre Männer, Söhne oder Brüder sind: irgendwo in Kosovo, bei der UCK, oder"

Ja, und da sind wir nun: Sali, Casey, Lisa, Karen und ich. Es ist klar, wir werden nie alle Menschen hier im Lager kennenlernen und schon gar nicht alle Probleme abgehen können-, aber das darf uns nicht entmutigen und so geben wir einander unsere Wünsche bekannt: Sali will mit den Frauen arbeiten und sie bringt es erstaunlicherweise innert kürzester Zeit fertig, dass Frauen sich treffen, stricken, von ihren Erlebnissen sprechen. Casey sammelt die Jungen zum Volleyball und zu einer Holzgruppe, später widmet er sich zusammen mit Karen, Lisa und einem Kosovo-Albaner sehr der Minen-Prävention. Für mich sind die Kinder wichtig .

Hier einige Erlebnisse:

Bei Kreis- und Ballspielen stehen immer einzelne Kinder ausserhalb des Kreises, mit hängenden Armen und apathischem Gesichtsausdruck, ins Leere blickende Augen. Auusserst vorsichtig versuche ich so ein Kind ganz fein zu berühren, es reagiert mit abweisender Starrheit. Ich lasse dem Kind Zeit, wir spielen weiter. Am nächsten Tag lässt es sich an der Hand nehmen und steht im Kreis. Ist es zu glauben: schon am dritten Tag kennst Du das Kind nicht wieder, es rennt umher, spielt begeistert mit, hat einen offenen Blick, lebendige Bewegungen. Und das ereignet sich jeden Tag. Wir beobachten, dass die Kinder anfangen von sich aus zu spielen, ohne unsere Anregung. Ich sehe, wie ungeheuer wichtig es ist, den Kindern sofort, heute, Hilfe anzubieten, denn jetzt kann ich das noch mit einfachen Mitteln: Spiel, Sport, Zeichnen, Malen, aber natürlich mit einem grossen Einsatz meiner ganzen Persönlichkeit. Wie viel Kraft, Einsatz, Arbeit wird später in Kosovo nötig sein, das dürfen wir uns gar nicht vorstellen. Was wir hören und miterleben geht oft an die Grenzen des Ertragbaren, und nur mit Hilfe der albanische Mentalität des Zeithabens, des Zusammensitzen und Diskutierens können wir immer wieder mit neuen Kräften an die Arbeit gehen.

Am 3. Tag des Lagerlebens sind mein Rücken und meine Schultern recht verspannt (sind es die Pritschen oder die neuen



Herausforderungen?). Ich weiss, dass viele Kosovo-Albaner von Kindheit an lernen ihre Familienangehörigen zu massieren. Ich schlendere den Zeltreihen entlang, um irgendwen zu entdecken. Einige junge Leute zeigen mir ein Mädchen von ungefähr 14 Jahren. Sie steht verloren da, macht den Eindruck eines etwas debilen Mädchens, auch wenn ich ihre Worte nicht verstehe, merke ich, dass sie unartikuliert spricht und stark stottert. Sie geleitet mich in ihr Familienzelt auf ein Matratze und kniet sich neben mich. Sie hat wundervolle Hände und massiert gekonnt meinen Rücken mit grosser Hingabe, immer wieder legt sie ihre Wange an meine und küsst mich liebevoll. Sie fühlt sich glücklich. Die nächsten Tage winkt sie mir immer ganz fröhlich, wenn ich ihr irgendwo begegne. Am letzten Tag bin ich bei ihrer Familie zum Kaffee eingeladen. Ist es möglich? Das Mädchen spricht ganz normal und fliessend und sie blickt mit offenem Blick umher, keine Spur von Debität. Später lese ich, dass es für Jugendliche wichtig ist, wieder einen Sinn ihrer Existenz zu erleben.

Jeden Nachmittag malen wir im grossen Aufenthaltszelt. Die Kinder sind sehr ungeduldig, aufgeregt, zapplig, fordernd: "ich will, ich will ich will!" sie schreien und stossen einander weg, versuchen alles an sich zu raffen. Kinder, die auf die 2. Gruppe vertröstet werden, können das überhaupt nicht verstehen, schreien, reissen Papier oder die Pinsel weg. Chaos. Es brauchte eine straffe Führung und klare Spielregeln, damit es überhaupt möglich wird, dass ein Kind ruhig und konzentriert malen kann, aber jeden Tag geht es etwas besser. Die Kinder malen mit der Zeit hingebungsvoll und in bunten Farben. Die Hoffnung auf baldige Rückkehr ist in fast allen Bildern ersichtlich: schöne Häuser und prächtige Blumen: "so ist es bei mir zuhause in Kosova! Kommst Du dann zu mir zum Kaffee und zum Tee, bitte! "Ja, ich werde kommen."- ich wage kaum zu denken, was die Kinder erleben werden, wenn sie nächstens zurückfahren, ihr zerstörtes Haus sehen - und wir müssen die Kinder vor den Bodenminen warnen, die als Filzstifte, Plüschtiere, Lippenstifte etc getarnt sind

und die Kinder verletzen können. Wie lange wird es dauern, bis Kinder und Jugendliche wieder singen können, wir haben sie nie gehört.

Ein 12-jähriger Junge sitzt am Boden, er malt gross und eindrucksvoll: UCK. Ich erlebe, wie die Kinder aggressiv und aufgeregt werden, wenn sie dieses Signet ihrer Befreiungsarmee schreiben. Ich ordne deshalb an, dass *ein* UCK-Bild genüge. Der Junge ist schon so sehr "aufgepulvert", dass er nur noch wild Farbe auf sein Papier schmiert, dann Wasser über das Blatt ausleert, immer auf meine Reaktion wartet und schlussendlich das Blatt mit seinen Füssen umher schleudert, dann kommt er, in der wagen Hoffnung, dass ich sein Bild lobe. Nach reiflicher Ueberlegung reisse ich das Blatt demonstrativ und in Zeitlu-pentempo entzwei und schicke ihn zum Zelt hinaus. Wie viel habe ich zerstört, was wird passieren, es ist mir bange. Nach einer halben Stunde steht der Junge vor dem Zelteingang und fragt, ob er wieder kommen darf. Ich gebe ihm ganz genaue Anweisungen und er sitzt ruhig an seinem separat zugewiesenen Platz.. Er malt eine volle Stunde in voller Konzentration.

Agression: Folgendes ereignet sich in der 1. Woche mehrmals täglich:

Wir spielen mit einer Kindergruppe. Plötzlich werden wir von einer Gruppe Knaben (8-12 J) regelrecht "überfallen", sie gestikulieren mit imaginären Waffen, schreien, reissen den Ball weg, werfen ihn planlos weg, schleudern alles weg, was ihnen vor die Füsse kommt, - wir stehen ratlos da. Versuchte man einen Jungen anzufassen, reagiert er mit unkontrollierten und verkrampten Bewegungen. Was haben diese Kinder alles miterlebt, sie können nicht sprechen, auch wenn wir ihre Sprache verstehen würden. Nach einer Woche realisieren wir, dass sich diese Gruppe aufgelöst hat. Ja, wo sind die Jungen denn verschwunden? -Ach ja, dort sitzt ja einer und hämmert ganz vertieft an seinem Holzbänklein, und andere kommen jetzt ganz ruhig zum Malen oder sie spielen am



Abend mit uns das selbst gebastelte Memory.

matdorf, sie sind voller Hoffnung, was wird sie erwarten

Ein grösserer Junge möchte jedesmal die Spielkarten, wenn er mich antrifft. Gut, heute Abend wenn ich Feierabend habe, werden wir uns im Spielzelt treffen. Wir spielen "Bispirig", das Kartenspiel, das überall im Balkan bekannt ist. Ich achte darauf, dass die Spielregeln ganz genau eingehalten werden, da ich erlebe, dass die Kinder sonst ganz zerflattern, sicher eine Folge der Entwurzelung. Das Kartenspiel ist auch für mich Entspannung und Erholung und wir verbringen wirklich gemütliche und lustige Zeit zusammen. Es ist herrlich nach der grossen Hitze des Tages, am Abend draussen zu sitzen bis es dunkel ist und alle sich in ihre Zelte zurückziehen. Eines Abends beginnt der Junge von sich aus zu erzählen (zum Glück kann ich jetzt so viel Albanisch verstehen): "Ich weiss, wie man mit einem Maschinengewehr umgeht. Ich bin 13 Jahre alt, der älteste Sohn meiner Familie. Ich habe meinem Vater geholfen, meine Familie und unser Haus zu bewachen und zu verteidigen. Wir haben uns abgewechselt mit der Nachtwache." Weiter spricht er nicht.

Ich bin traurig, dass ich für den 5-Jährigen nichts tun kann, der sich immer wieder vor mich hinstellt, das rechte Aermchen vorgestreckt: "brrrrr..... brrrrr. brrrrr....." Ich umfasse den Kleinen, streichle ihm über den Kopf. Einige Minuten kann er sich entspannen. Schon wieder ist er dazu getrieben: "brrrrr.....brrrr.....brrrrr....." Er meint nicht mich, aber ich bin auch nicht lange genug für ihn da. Immer wieder stossen wir an Grenzen, müssen Probleme offen lassen.

Das Lager beginnt sich zu leeren. Wer irgendwo in Europa einen Verwandten hat, versucht Geld aufzutreiben, um die Heimreise zu organisieren. Das Rote Kreuz Belgien/Holland hat angeordnet, dass die Familien ihr Zelt und alles was dazu gehört, wie Matratzen, Kochgeschirr etc. mitnehmen dürfen. Ende Juni fahren dann auch die letzten mit Cars und Laster auf direktem Weg über Kukes bis in ihr Hei-

tirana, shemri and kosovo

Katharina Schnoering, german/swiss volunteer, Tirana/Shemri/Kosovo, 6 weeks

Back home, einen Tag frueher als geplant, nachdem ich in Kukes auf die Schweizer Armee traf, als ich mit UNHCR nach Tirana fliegen wollte (hierbei handelt es sich um die Pumafluege der Schweizer Armee fuer NGO's, Verletzte und Material) und ich mit dem Verantwortlichen fuer die Schweiz-Albanienfluege sprach, der so ueberrascht war, dass jemand schweizerdeutsch sprach, dass er mir gleich einen Flug heim anbot. Da ich ohnehin in Tirana nichts mehr zu tun hatte, ausser mein Flugticket zu holen, kam es, dass ich nach 3.5 Std. Flug mit einer spanischen Casa in Emmen landete.

Aber von Anfang an, als ich nach Tirana flog, tobte noch der Krieg, jede Nacht flogen die Bomber nach Jugoslawien. In dieser Zeit (in den ersten 3 Wochen) arbeite ich in vier verschiedenen Fluechtlingslagern, wo wir ein Kinderprogramm organisierten, war vor allem nach Friedensschluss eine Kampagne von UNICEF zur Minenawarnung miteinbezogen. Nebenbei machten wir aber viele kleine Programme, so bauten einige von uns Spielplaetze in den Fluechtlingscamps (spaeater auch in den Waystations) oder halfen bei einer Aufklaerungskampagne gegen Frauenhandel mit.

Rueckblickend ist es schwer zu begreifen, was sich in den letzten 7 Wochen in Albanien abgespielt hat. Als ich ankam war wie gesagt der Krieg noch in vollem Gange, dann kam der Friedensschluss und dann rasten die Fluechtlinge heim. An meinem letzten Tag (letzten Samstag) bin ich mit dem letzten offiziellen UNHCR Rueckfuehrungstransport von einem Fluechtlingslager zum anderen gefahren (Kukes 2, wo ich uebernachtet zu Kukes 1, wo der Helikopter abflog). Es war ein schoener Abschied, die Uebersetzer vom UNHCR sind mit dem gleichen Konvoi heimgefahren und da wir lange mit ihnen zusammengearbeitet haben, war es ein herzlicher Abschied.

Meine letzten 4 Wochen habe ich in einer Waystation verbracht. Das ist eine Art "Autobahnraststaette" fuer die Fluechtlinge. Hier konnten sie uebernachten, Essen, einen Arzt besuchen und Notfalls das Auto reparieren lassen (letzteres von der Italienischen Armee). Die Waystation Shemrie war 1.5 Std. von Kukes entfernt und eine der groessten ihrer Art, sie lag in den Bergen. Ich war dort verantwortlich fuer die Leute von Balkansunflowers und wir sind dort hauptsaechlich an der Strasse gestanden und Minenawarnungszettel, Lebensmittel, Spielsachen und Hygieneartikel verteilt. Das war dringend noetig, da die wenigsten Fluechtlinge eine Pause machen wollten, alle wollten nur so schnell wie moeglich heim und dabei gar keine Zeit verlieren. Am Anfang uebernachteten jede Nacht so um 400 Fluechtlinge in der Waystation. Ein Grund dafuer war, dass die Grenze nur von 7.00 Uhr morgens bis 19.00 Uhr Abends geoffnet war und die Fluechtlinge meist mit Traktoren unterwegs waren, in denen sie schlecht uebernachten konnten. Wir haben dann jeweils abends Spielsachen fuer die Kinder verteilt, da fuehlten wir uns alle wie Father Christmas und es war mit Abstand die schoenste Arbeit. Als dann die Konvois starteten halfen wir zusaetzlich in bei der Essensverteilung mit. Die in der ersten Zeit von der Salvation Armee verteilt wurde, bis diese vom ICHMUSSJETZTINDENKOSOVOVIRUS befallen wurde und eines Mittags einfach abgehauen ist, kurz bevor ein Konvoi mit 400 Fluechtlingen eintreffen sollte. In der Not haben wir dann das Brot was sie uns gelassen haben geschnitten und Eier gekocht, allerdings waren das nur 300 Stueck. Es war ein ziemlich beschissenens Gefuehl, als es nicht fuer alle reichte. Gluecklicherweise kam am naechsten Tag Solidarité, eine franzoesische Organisation, die echt gut war, anstatt der aufgewaermten Bohnensuppe aus der Buechse, die die Salvation Armee von verteilte, kauften sie bei lokalen Gemuese, Obst,

Brot und Kaese was sie anschliessend in Saecken verpackt an die Fluechtlinge abgaben. Das Problem hierbei war, dass wir die Nachricht bekamen, dass ein Konvoi von 500 Fluechtlingen kommen sollte, wir bereiteten alles dafuer vor (halfen Solidarité, machten Familypackete bereit, etc.) und dann fuhr der Transport einfach durch, oder wir erhielten via Funk die Nachricht, dass 4 Busse kommen sollten und dann kamen 15. Aber gemessen an den Problemen die sich in der Nacht bei uns abspielten, war das eine Bagadelle.

Zum Schutz der Fluechtlinge und unserem, waren in unserm Camp 13 Italienische Natosoldaten stationiert (die fuer uns jeden Abend super Pasta kochten). Wir waren enorm auf sie angewiesen, speziell am Schluss, denn als die Albaner merkten das unser Camp so langsam im Begriff war sich aufzuloesen und sie versuchten so viel wie moeglich noch davon zu profitieren. Aber von Anfang an, dass erste Mal als ich wirklich froh war um die Italiener war 3 Tage nachdem ich in Shemerie eingetroffen war und meine Gruppe hauptsaechlich aus dem Kosovarian Youth Council bestand. Da ueberfuhr ein UNHCR Auto ein 6 Jahre altes Maedchen und die Mutter brachte die Leiche zu uns, weil ein Doktor bei uns stationiert war, dieser war zu diesem Zeitpunkt allerdings gerade weg, da wir von Fluechtlingen von dem Unfall gehoert hatten und er mit dem Campmanager auf dem Weg zum Unfallort war, dummerweise muessen sich diese Auto gekreuzt haben. So kuemerten sich eine Tschechin und ich um die drei Frauen, die einen totalen Nervenzusammenbruch hatten, bis der Doktor zurueckkam. Der Campmanager (ein totaler Idiot, der nachher gefeuert wurde) brachte dann die Leiche zurueck und fuhr nach Kukes und uebergab mir die Verantwortung fuer das Camp. Auch der Mitarbeiter vom technischen Hilfswerk fuhr weg, da ihn das alles an eine persoehnliche Tragoedie erinnerte. So war ich nach drei Tagen fuer eine Nacht und einen Tag fuer das Camp verantwortlich und das in einem Land wo Blutrache herrscht und niemand genau wusste wie unsere Stellung als Internationale jetzt ist, da ja UNHCR am Unfall

Schuld war. Gluecklicherweise geschah nichts, aber solche schrecklichen Zwischenfaelle zogen sich durch die vier Wochen hindurch, das schlimmste war ein Ueberfall in Shemerie auf Fluechtlinge, wo einem Fluechtling vier Kugeln in den Ruecken gejagt wurden und ein anderer so schwer verletzt das wir nicht dachten, dass er ueberleben wuerde, denn ein Teil von seinem Gesicht war weggeschossen und die Wunde liess sich nicht schliessen. Dies geschah alles in der Nacht und wir mussten 3 Stunden warten bis die Nato endlich einen Helikopter schickte. Aber auch dies ging schlussendlich gut aus, der Fluechtling mit den Kugeln im Ruecken ist inzwischen im Kosovo und der andere bekommt plastische Chirugie in Italien. Die Fluechtlinge kamen uebrigens gerade aus Deutschland und waren sich der Sicherheitslage in Albanien ueberhaupt nicht bewusst.

Die Abenteuerlichste Geschichte war, als ein Bus mit Motorschaden 5 km von unserer Waystation kaputtging und UNHCR es nicht schafte einen Ersatzbus zu bekommen. Nach 4 std bekamen dann endlich die Italiener die Erlaubnis einen Teil ihrer Leute zum Schutz der Fluechtlinge zum Bus zu senden, keine Minute zu frueh, denn kurz darauf traff die Albanische Polizei ein (im Gegensatz zu Schweizer Polizei ein grosses Problem!). In der Zwischenzeit hatte ich einen leerstehenden Bus entdeckt und den Fahrer geweckt (Nachts um 1 Uhr) und ihn dazu gebracht zum kaputten Bus zu fahren (mittels \$ 20). Was uns auch gut gelang, und so brachten wir die Fluechtlinge zu unserer Waystation, wobei mich der Italienische Sergant danach am liebsten verhauen haette, weil ich mitten in der Nacht mit 2 albanischen Busfahreren durch die Gegend gefahren bin. Dafuer durften aber seine Soldaten wieder zurueckfahren und mussten nicht die ganze Nacht am Bus Wache schieben.

Ansonsten hatten wir fast jede Nacht Probleme mit der Sicherheitspolizei von Albanien, sei es das sie 20m von uns entfernt mit Kalaschnikows rumballerten um die Italiener zu provozieren oder das sie durch

das Gebuesch in unser Camp gekrochen kamen.

Meine letzten 2 Tage verbrachte ich im Kosovo, was nach Shemerie eine richtige Erholung war. Ich war ueberrascht wie normal das Leben schon wieder ist. Ein Freund sagte anschliessend, wenn man von den Schaeden an den Gebaueden im Kosovo absieht und wieder nach Albanien zurueckkommt hat man das Gefuehl der Krieg war in Albanien und nicht im Kosovo, so stark ist Albanien runtergewirtschaftet und ich hoffe sehr stark, dass jetzt die Humanitaere Hilfe auch nach Albanien fliesst.

In Pristina und Prizeren sind die Schaeden ziemlich gering, anders hingegen in Gjakova und Peja. Aber im Gegensatz zu Bosnien wurde keine Artellerie verwendet (soweit ich gesehen habe) und deshalb sind die Schaeden nicht so enorm (natuerlich ist es um jedes Haus was zerstoert ist schade). Schlimm ist hingegen die Situation in den Doerfern, wo teilweise 80 % zerstoert ist und im Gegensatz zu den Staedten nicht so viele NGO's sind. Doch ich denke Kosovo hat gute Chancen, dass es bald wieder aufwaerts geht, allein in Gjakova sind ueber 80 NGO's vertreten, so gibt es dort auch ein Fluechtlingslager fuer die Leute deren Haueser kaputt sind.

Was mir Sorgen macht ist die Situation in Jugoslawien und ich wuensche mir, das im Winter die NGOS mit dem gleichen Eifer dort helfen wie jetzt im Kosovo.





kosovo/a journal

Rand Engel

31 July, 1999.

"The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned." Yeats repeats himself to me again and again walking through the cobbled streets of the old town of Gjakova, Kosova to the Save the Children Fund (SCF) office. It must have been beautiful, Gjakova. Perhaps Dresden was beautiful, too, before the bombing, or Tokyo. I know their post-war desolation only from news-reel footage. Here I walk through block after block of blackened walls. Here a charred stove remains. There a brick chimney. Charred beams prop against walls. The fires consumed the beams and rafters, the ubiquitous red tiles cracked and broke, and roof after roof collapsed filling the small rooms with rubble. House after house: sooted walls, shattered glass, collapsed roof, tile rubble.

At SCF more than one hundred people wait patiently under a blue UN plastic tarp to use two Satellite telephones. They are using the two minutes each is allowed to reach a distant relative, find the survivors of their families, to be reunited. I'm grateful for the chance to help a local technician rewrite his resume: he has valuable experience - and I avoid desolation for a few minutes.

The destruction is everywhere but it is worse where there was beauty or antiquity. The blood-dimmed tide will erase culture and heritage. On the other hand, the gray apartment blocks, though looted, usually escaped the flames.

This morning "Lucky", an 18-year-old UN radio operator corrects me. "Do you know of any Serbs who helped or protected Albanians?" I ask him. I'm looking for understanding, and for the small seeds of future peace. "The shooting started at 7:30, in my village, three kilometers from Peje."

Speaking, he seems as if he has entered a trance. "My father pushed me out the back door. 'Hide across the river.' I waded across the river, the water up to my neck, like ice, and hid on the other side. I heard the gunfire. I saw the houses burn. At 3:30, they were gone and I went back to help the wounded. One man survived and told me. The Serbs put the men in three groups, more than 10 in each group, in three houses. They knifed one. The rest they shot. Then they set the houses on fire. I'm not interested in your question. No one helped. More than 40 people died. Most from my family." What about his father? I was unable to ask.

I know of another village in that area. Of the hundred people remaining there 8 are widows. The band that attacked that village executed all the men - any male over 12. After all, twelve-year-olds could fight. One old grandmother clung fiercely to her 12-year-old grandson, though she did not know all were to be killed. He survived.

A few weeks prior to joining the Balkan Sunflowers in the refugee camps in Albania, I watched a 1946 British documentary. Smiling and chatting townspeople were being led by Allied Occupation troops to see the concentration camp short miles from their town. They left in tears and shock. Their threshold of denial was high, not insurmountable. I do not blame all Serbs but I wonder if the Serbian nation which shared Slobodan Milosevic's ultra nationalist nightmare will ever have to face its dark reality. Without truth, there is little hope for peace or reconciliation.

Walking back to the Balkan Sunflowers office I look at every death notice. I know those in Prishtina; though new ones appear daily, the hundreds of names and faces taped and nailed to walls, street lamps and trees are familiar. In Gjakova they are all new. Boys, young men, old men,

women, whole families: names, dates of birth and death, a photo, red border, black Albanian double eagle. I stare at them constantly in Prishtina. They grant neither understanding nor absolution. Their deaths so remarked, life continues. Vendors set up shop in front of burned ruins: piles of jeans and shirts, plastic kitchenware, food, shoes, everywhere cigarettes. In buildings that were not burnt, the smashed glass is replaced. Restaurants are open. Cafes. New televisions and stereo centers have begun appearing in the shops, along with refrigerators, stoves, and vacuum cleaners. The roads from Greece and Macedonia are packed with trucks bringing not only the relief supplies that must prevent death for hundreds of thousands of people who have lost everything, but the merchandise filling the shops with startling rapidity.

A few hours ago, on the bus to Gjakova, Faton a dental student and champion volleyball player said that he had many Serb friends as a child; then he went to college and they joined the police. "Then they changed." A taxi driver, though, tells me that his father and mother stayed during the war, though he escaped to Macedonia. A nurse across the hallway, a Serb woman, watched out for them and gave his father, a diabetic, insulin. The driver tells me his family helped the nurse too, after the war, when Albanians threatened her. I am grateful for any such story. It's not just Serbs or Albanians; certainly we too have nationalist passions. It's the stories of humanity: the "righteous gentile" of the Holocaust, the righteous Serb who resisted the Kosovo tragedy, perhaps at great personal risk.

Young Kosovar Albanians who feared going out at night during the last decade fill the streets with a mad urge to meet, socialize, drink, and listen to rock music.

19 September 1999.

War tourism. In July we heard that an enterprising German company was offering tours of Kosova for several thousand Deutschmarks. I wonder how they pro-

moted it. See the burning buildings and destroyed villages. Visit a mass grave. Walk the cobblestone streets of Gjakova, home of artists studios and small cafes ... before. See how primary school mines are placed. Graffiti art. Some aid workers are war tourists. Maybe many of us are to some degree. It became an issue in one of our teams. Tourists versus purists. The tourists wanted to see the country, visit Serbian areas, sites of atrocities. They wanted to understand, they said, to hear what the Serbs had to say and see what was happening to them now. They wanted to understand what had happened before. To be able to tell a more complete story when they returned home and perhaps did talks to public groups as well as their friends and families. The purists accused them of morbid curiosity and insensitivity as well as entering into potential danger and jeopardizing our mission. "We did not have these war tourists in Bosnia. Why do so many come here?" one of the veterans lamented.

Driving from Prishtina (Serbian Pristina) to Peje (Serbian Pec) with a friend by a previously untravelled road, my friend says there is a mass grave on the way. He wants to stop there. Repelled and interested, I don't answer. I'm not a war tourist, I tell myself. Why would I go to such a place? To understand? What can I possibly understand there? What can the mounds of dirt tell me? Is there any chance that the spirits attracted or held by the place can whisper anything revealing about what happened there and why? I doubt it. I know groups that regularly pray and meditate at Auschwitz. Why? My friend asks again, "So, do you want to stop?" I blurt out, not knowing the connection, "Okay, but don't take any pictures." He gives me a pitying stare and says, "Sure."

We pull off the road and park in a large parking area. When a mass grave site is discovered, an investigating team goes to the site: equipment, laborers, forensic doctors. Each grave is disinterred and forensic evidence is taken for possible identification of victims by family, and also for potential

prosecutions. Lying in the earth through the warm summer, by the time of exhumation little more than skeleton and clothes are left. Swatches of clothing and personal articles are attached to cardboard; families may be able to identify their loved ones from the bits remaining of the clothing they were wearing when murdered. Then the bodies are wrapped in plastic and reburied. The grave is marked. If the victim is identified, the family will come and once more dig up the remains for reburial in their own graveyard.

I expected to see family survivors there, something redeeming in the site itself. No. It's one of the largest mass grave sites - a hundred or more. It is ringed by wire and a wooden stair case is built over the fence for entrance. Colored tape marks other areas. Trash is everywhere: paper, empty water bottles, coke and fanta cans. Candy wrappers. Here the hundred plus graves marked by the numbered wooden stakes are strewn with pieces of clothing, rags, plastic sandals. Even inside the fenced area there are discarded water bottles. I stand outside the fence. There is a smell everywhere here. Is it...? Much later I drive by a dead dog. Confirmed. Death. My friend goes in, walking among the graves. We are at far ends when I see him take a camera from his vest - the ubiquitous multi-pocketed vests that war correspondents and aid workers favor - and start taking shots.

Can we possibly understand such a place by visiting it, or writing about it, or later looking at our photos, or showing them to others? I want to - but it is impossible.

The Israelis. Liron, a medical student from Beersheva, Israel, working with Aid Without Borders (AWB), an Israeli organization, tells me that the "Joint" wants to see me. The Joint? The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Without a working phone system, you see people you want to talk with at meetings - or receive messages. I know about the Joint but I haven't met them. In July Jonathan, one of our volunteers, arranged to find a sister school for

a Prishtina primary school, but backed off looking for more assistance when the Joint's involvement became clear: they had the school and they were doing it 100%. I left Liron and went looking for Eli Eliezri at the Hotel Grand Prishtina. I called from the lobby and Eli invited me to his room. When I got there, the door was open and Eli was at the window feeding pages into a fax machine connected to a computer and a satellite phone. Damn, I think, I love it when things are set up right. I had joined the organization that answered my volunteer inquiry; but there was rarely the money to do it right. Eli says come in come in. Eli finishes his faxing and sits with me. They have completed restoration of 14 primary schools in Prishtina but would like someone to take on the playgrounds for the project. Are we interested? No, I say. We work with kids and are building a playground park in Prishtina, and involved in a playground in Peje - but that is not our primary mission and we are not set up for that. Okay. We talk a little and he asks me to meet his assistant, next door, Nir. Nir, woken from a nap, and I talk a bit more in the hallway - his room a mess - and I'm invited to Rosh Hashonah dinner. They are hosting dinner for the Prizren Jewish community, some 40 strong, Friday night. Eli comes out in the hall and offers me a beer. "Thanks, but I have to drive." "So stay over." "Next time." Next time is acceptable in the Balkans. No is not. I try to interest Nir in a high school 100 meters from the primary school they had repaired in the center of Prishtina. Friends go to that school; we making a video about the school. It is a century old building with three students per bench in small rooms heated by tiny wood/coal stoves. Paramilitaries lived in the school after the bombing started. There is a room in the basement where blood and a woman's dress were found by the building maintenance staff after the war. The computers were gone. The physics laboratory, donated shortly before the war by Soros, was shattered. The school has virtually nothing else except good students. Nir says they do primary schools. Not really secondary schools. But perhaps later. Later is as good as next time.

Eli arrived in Prishtina, I hear later, three days after the bombing stopped. He set up and went to work. He and Nir have a driver and translator. But no other foreign or local staff. They hire as needed. They have no building, house, or office except the Grand Hotel. They committed to renovating 14 primary schools - and they did. One cannot explain how rare that is, at least in anything like timely. They have done first class: new plumbing, electric, windows, etc. Of course, most schools needed new windows since so much of the glass was smashed. Eli is said to work constantly; pushing, demanding, driving, getting the work done by his contractors. I think most organizations would have come in, hired a house and begun the renovations to make sure the house was adequate and serviceable for their needs, hired local staff, brought in a half dozen expatriates, purchased two big white four wheel drive vehicles, had another donated to them by the UN; done lots of assessments, then agreed to do the fourteen schools, then begun the process - etc., etc. And eventually they would probably get done.

French toast. Lisa, one of our Peje coordinators, Janine a new volunteer from New York, and I sit for breakfast in a restaurant next to Peje's UNMIK (UN Mission in Kosovo) headquarters. I want something different to eat. They offer meat, sausage, omelets, salads. Unless there is pizza and pasta, that is virtually all that is offered by all the restaurants in Kosova. (Okay sometimes fish and soup.) I ask for french toast. Crack eggs, soak bread, fry it, I explain. The waiter says no. We try a second waiter. He agrees. Actually, I don't like restaurant french toast but I'm determined to have something different and that is the only thing I can imagine. Sheldon, the UNICEF officer in Peje, joins us. Lisa explains a project idea : during the last three weeks thousands of toy guns have poured into Kosova every boy is armed; perhaps we could promote an exchange of toy guns for other non-violent toys. Sheldon explains a half-dozen very good reasons why it's a good idea with wrong timing, wrong politics, wrong effect on our program. The

french toast arrives. Its covered in mayonnaise and olives. We discuss park benches with Sheldon, as we are working on restoration of the city parks in Peje; he leaves. Lisa chats a few minutes with a young man, from the local UCK. UCK is the Albanian acronym for the KLA - the Kosova Liberation Army. Lisa had been harassed by a local man. The UCK made sure the man knew Lisa is a friend - beware. The french toast, after the mayonnaise is scraped off, is pretty good. Yngva, a Danish electrical consultant, joins us. His outfit is contracted to ensure that electricity is restored to villages being served by the Danish Refugee Council. DRC is coordinating emergency services for perhaps 10 villages that have been destroyed by the Serbs. The primary effort is to get some sort of roof - probably timber and plastic sheet - on the burned houses and winterize one room for the family, as well as coordinate other aid distribution.

September 25.

Shelter. Three months after the entrance of NATO, the UN and the NGOs (Non-governmental organizations, the aid agencies) into Kosovo, everyone knows that providing shelter has gone too slowly, that there is a bottleneck of building materials being ordered and delivered, and that it is going to be a very difficult winter for tens if not hundreds of thousands of people. A UN person said in a meeting the other day, "We are counting on the traditional hospitality of the Kosovars to take in the people without shelter." So there will be people with one warm room in their burned out houses, thousands in collective centers, and many seeking shelter in already overcrowded homes and apartments, mostly in the cities. How many will not be covered at all? Karen is here for the weekend. She was a Balkan Sunflowers volunteer , first in the refugee camp in Vllora, Albania in June, coming into Kosova early. She found a logistics position with World Vision, a large aid agency; she is responsible for shelter kit distribution for 3000 families in the Mitrovica area. Mitrovica is divided artificially into tense Serb and Albanian

zones. The city and surrounding villages are devastated. Karen left a career in filmmaking in LA to be an aid worker. She says they must try to get the 3000 kits distributed to the villages over the next month. She must also hire the engineers and teams who will supervise the construction. She sees the farmers. They have nothing, she says. Everything was destroyed. Now they are terribly grateful for the beams and plastic, which hopefully will help them survive the winter. Of course, many lie. All sorts of people trying for extra plastic and timber. "There is a destroyed house you missed." "I represent the family," says a ten-year old.

Trash. Trash and garbage is everywhere. Peje butchers haul cows bones to the bridge and dump them in the river below. All day tractors and dump trucks haul war debris from one spot or another to a road outside of town and dump beside the road. The road into Peje is lined with a kilometer or more of piles of rubble: destruction materials, burned stoves, burned out cars. There are thousands of smashed or burned cars. We arranged the bulldozing of a large field near our Prishtina apartment - more on that later - and a day later there were three smashed cars dumped there, and within a few more days hundreds of piles of construction and destruction debris. Every Kosovar living space I have visited - including crowded rooms in the refugee camps - is immaculately clean. But the outside is trashed. Litter is everywhere. Trash collection is poor. We got NATO to clean up the trash in our area twice. Most recently the dumpster filled, then the trash spilled over the edges, then spread out from the dumpster until it was in a circle some twenty feet wide around the dumpster. Of course not only does that create a problem, but the blowing winds pick up the plastic bags and other litter and carry them everywhere. Everywhere. On Monday I took a local friend - Genc, a neighbor who attends the high school mentioned above, who has helped sort out computer problems and translated for me, to the offices of the municipal sanitation company. I explained to the manager that

our organization was responsible for a UNICEF funded urban environmental awareness program in Peje (read "Put your trash in the barrel.") and wanted to find out what was happening in Prishtina and what might be possible. I also wanted to get our dumpster picked up. The manager rode out to the site with us and promised to get it picked up. By Tuesday it was picked up - often small victories mean you got something for your neighbors that means someone else's neighbors don't get it. Of course, completely like New York, Washington or Boston, trash pickup is much better in the center of town, say for example next to UN headquarters, than here on the edge. The UN area dumpsters are always empty.

I hate the trash so it seems to become some sort of compulsion. Sometimes the more you dislike something the more involved you become with it. A weird twist. Some days I go outside my apartment and start raking and picking up the trash. Soon a few children join in; then a few adults. Soon there are twenty or so people cleaning for an hour or so. I think they don't like it either, but it is so accepted, so intractable a problem, that no one gives it much thought. If there are not enough places to put your trash, if the municipal services were gutted ten years ago and pickup is irregular, the wind carries the trash everywhere, you cannot affect what happens - the state of government and occupation at least the last ten years - why do anything. Indeed, how not toss your coke can on the street. What good can it do to hold it until you find a place to put it? There are a thousand already on the street and the place you find to put it is an overflowing dump.

We have organized cleanups - well received and participated in events. Clean the trash, play volleyball, food, music. But I've come to think they do no good unless there is a full program in place: enough receptacles, enough trucks, a good pickup schedule, an awareness program. We can do awareness, as an organization, but can't do the rest. Now I'm attending sanitation meetings. Yikes!

The fleets of trucks are the old mostly damaged ones. The best equipment was taken north by the Serbians - along it seems with all of this place's computers, VCRs, televisions, refrigerators. The looting was incredible. At a Sanitation Meeting an American officer attached to UNMIK tells us, (quote very approximate), "This is a third-world country. Don't expect European standards. There is not enough money. This kind of truck costs \$250,000. And you would need two or three. What donor is going to pay for it? This is not a high priority. There is no money for the salaries for the water and sanitation workers. An NGO has to apply for a short-term grant, which can be used to pay the minimum force. ... A cold winter will keep the sanitation problem down for a while. The sanitation services are expected to pay their own way. Of course, that won't happen and there won't be enough UN money." An so on. You knew this guy knew what he was talking about, just as you knew he would get you whatever he could far better than most people would be able. And progress seemed hopeless.

Two days later I drive Akiko and Andrea over to the Royal Engineers base to see Captain Swayles. Akiko works with Association to Aid Refugees, Japan. She doesn't like trash either. Andrea took a holiday from her job at the UN in New York to visit a friend here; she decided to stay and has been working with us. I met Captain Swayles when we sought help to prepare some land for a playground and football field. Jonathan, mentioned above and a great networker, had made the Royal connection. The royal engineers sent two great tank bulldozers and a backhoe out to clear a field - which then the municipal planning office said we could not use for the park after all. A sorry tale, which Captain Swayles did not hold against me. (Meanwhile the playground park will go in 100 meters away.) The Royal Engineers are an extraordinary outfit. They are all over doing works: a playground at a primary school, restoring a great fountain in the center of Prishtina, our playing field, as well as restoring the power stations and

running the sanitation system in Prishtina. So Captain Swayles was, until recently the chief of sanitation for Prishtina, which he has happily given over to the municipal agency. He helped arrange OTI (US AID) funding to pay the workers for three months. It is easier to get such things in Prishtina where the UN, the US, the Brits and all the NGOs are located. I love the guy. He's direct, and has enough energy for ten. Akiko wants to do a cleanup of an area where her organization is operating. The Captain tells her what Royals might be of assistance. I want to know how things work. He suggests that either local groups or NGOs have to take on their neighborhoods if they are going to be clean. There will not be enough money or equipment. He tells us who does what, how the sanitation program is organized and where the municipal dump is. If the city is ever to be clean tractors and trucks have to use the dump rather than whatever lot is convenient. To cap a wonderful day, the Captain's driver leads us out to look at the dump. It is, after all, useful to know how the system works. I should mention - we had lunch at the base, my second meal with the Royal Engineers. Always a pleasure to have a dining option around here!

I don't know if we will be involved in Prishtina cleanup. We have a Peje project. We have a lot to do. I don't want to undertake another cleanup / awareness campaign unless I think all the pieces are available for success.

The Land. It is a startlingly beautiful country. I doubt any news report conveys that: not the film of refugees on box cars, or long lines of tractors and people on foot, not the stories of a church bombed to rubble, or tension in a divided city, or the success or lack of of the bombing campaign. The village houses have white walls and red tile roofs. Walls with great wooden gates often surround house compounds. The fields are, many, neglected for the last year, but show they have usually been well-tended and cultivated. The land is hilly and rich looking. To the north the Albanian Alps, the mountains of Montenegro,



are covered in forest. There is extensive forest as well as farm land. Though more than half of livestock was destroyed in the war, cattle, sheep and goats graze. Though more than 70% of the crops were not planted or did not survive, there are great fields of corn and sunflowers. Villages sit beside the road or are tucked in distant valleys. A winding tree-lined road, leads to a hamlet with a dozen compounds all surrounded by ten-foot walls. The great wooden gates are decorated. In this case, though the gates are unharmed, behind the house is shattered, charred beams, broken block walls. A shed beside is intact, made of clay-stray brick, the nestled red tiles a perfect symbol of rural order. Beside another house a green UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) tent housing the family.

Small tractors pull trapezoidal wooden wagons. A wagon carries the farmer, three children, a large woman with a kerchief covering her hair. Another hauls firewood. For more than a month, people have been putting aside firewood for the winter. The tractors are small, some little more than lawnmower engines. Many wagons are horse-drawn. Great double carriage trucks with UNHCR, Medicin San Frontiers, KFOR, NATO, Premiere Urgence, Samaritan's Purse or a dozen other logos slow down behind the horse-drawn wagons then pass when the road is clear. They carry shelter kits, lumber, tile, food, medicine, military hardware. The last couple days I've seen two large trucks overturned. There is a dirt detour on the Prishtina-Peje road, around a NATO bombed bridge. The detour has a few spots that can be treacherous for a big truck with a high load and, I suspect, an inexperienced or impatient driver. (Fear not, reader, perfectly okay for the Balkan Sunflowers white Opel.) The roads here are fairly good, after all.

Bicycle pump. This morning the bell rang at 8:00 am. It's Sunday but I was up early typing this letter. A neighbor boy is at the door with his bicycle. "Pump, pump." "Yo," I say, "Tete ora yo. Nont ora yo. Dhyet ora po. Dhyet ora shum mir." No. Eight no, nine

no, ten yes, ten o'clock very good." This is the limit of my Albanian. I don't want eight o'clock door bells. Andrea comes afternoons to play with the children and lead art activities. We supply balls and games for activities. And we have the bicycle pump; one day a few weeks ago one child or another was ringing the bell to borrow or return a ball or pump about every ten minutes for four hours. We put a foot down. The boy begs. He smiles, points at the tire. Just this once. Please just this tire. I hold firm. No I say. Yes, he says. He looks like a puppy dog, a sweet conman; he's determined to get the pump; I'm determined to not have the bell ring at 8:00 am. He sees the pump just inside the door and takes it in hand. The moment of truth has arrived. I take it back. "Dhyet ora shum mir," I say. There's a new law in town.

* * *

If you have read so much, thanks. Last night I showed Karen my picture album - friends, family, teachers, a couple animal friends. Some homesickness and missing. So awoke early this morning to write a report. Sending it out to my email list. I'm happy and well. Health has been good. It seems we are doing some good activities with children - our primary mission. We are also moving lots of wheels which I hope we are skillful enough to get in gear, engage to the engines that will drive some good projects to completion. With time...

14 November, 1999.

Ed enters the kitchen of the Sunflower flat. He's just walked up the hill from the World Food Program office; he's gone there to book a flight to Rome. "The plane's gone off radar. About twenty minutes ago." It takes a minute to grasp what he's said. "Anyway, it could be anything. They don't know if there is a problem or not." You know immediately, that there is a problem and it is probably horrible. The campaign of hope begins. Maybe.... Maybe. Information is so slow, or so selective. The afternoon passes and there is no more

information. Has not been heard from. Yes, it's announced the plane is missing. Wam, who founded Balkan Sunflowers, calls. His voice lacks its usual lift. Do we know if any of our volunteers were expected on this plane? No. No one expected. There is probably someone who is known. Two weeks ago I took the return WFP flight from Rome to Prishtina. I knew one of the Italian workers. Smiled at the stewardesses, thanked the pilot on the way out. Perhaps there were the same stewardesses, the same captain today. Another known aid worker. It is personal. The plane was comfortable, very clean, looked reasonably new. If you fly, you have been on Boeings and McDonnell Douglas planes that came off their assembly lines in 1960. That have flown millions of miles! You've gone into the little toilet at the rear that made you pray the engines were better maintained.

The WFP flight, chartered from an Italian aviation company, flew six days per week carrying UN workers, International Police, and foreign aid workers between Tirana, Prishtina and Rome. Until commercial flights resumed a few weeks ago, it was the best way to take R&R or get an onward flight. And it was free. We've used it, cumulatively, dozens of times.

Information. I found the BBC station on the radio, though I had not bothered for it in the last three months. There was a rumor that the plane had landed. Then another that it had landed in a minefield. Discussion about what that would mean. I thought about the flight path as I had seen it two weeks ago - down the spine of Italy over Italian villages sparkling like ripe grapes, tucked in green valleys, across the Adriatic, over the Albanian coastal plane, above the Albanian alps. The villages appeared sharper, rougher, but still, from 10,000 feet romantic, pastoral, clean. The mountains grew, became grayer, less peopled, with the villages, then a large town - perhaps Kukës - more scattered, streams and rivers gathered into large lakes, then poured onward; then the mountains fell away. The foothills on the Kosovo side

were softer, roads more distinct. Being a nervous flyer, I scouted places that a plane could land. Now it seemed so particularly foolish - but hopeful, because the countryside from 2 miles appeared benign. But just as you knew when the plane had been off radar for twenty minutes that the worst had happened, you knew it hours later when no more was confirmed. You accept for a minute a report of a landing, or a landing in a minefield, work out the meaning, then know it does not fit. You hope, but you know better.

In small communities news is personal. You were on the same bus or airplane. You met someone. In Israel a few years ago, I had tea with a wonderful woman at Neve Shalom, the Israeli-Arab peace village. A week later an Israeli helicopter went down in Lebanon. I could see that Israel was in shock, but it wasn't my shock. A day later I heard that that woman's son had been on board. Then saw her picture at the funeral. In a way, I had become part of Israel. Every loss becomes close and personal.

Finally, it is confirmed. The flight crashed in the mountains some 20 miles from Prishtina on the direct flight path in. All on board lost.

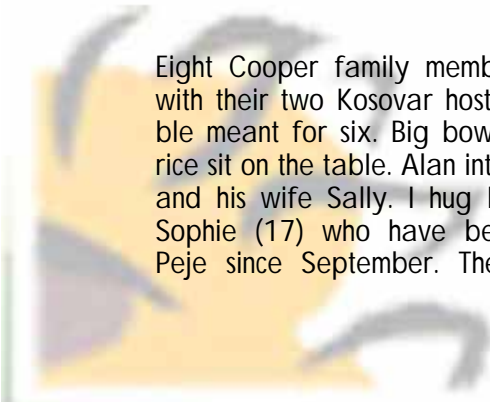
Saturday. All the local papers have pictures of a beautiful plane in flight. They look like they have been provided by travel agents or the company's PR department. I have been to UNICEF, to the shop making 75 trash bins for our Peje park project, a sign maker making 210 signs we've ordered for that project, and to a friend in the basement of the United Nations who lets me use his UN internet connection. I email my family that I'm fine; I know that the lost airplane will be close and personal for them too. I checked the internet for a passenger list. At the taxi stand, I head toward a particularly shiny white Mercedes - and see as I get closer that it is a driver I've been with a couple times before. We greet like old friends - a Balkan thing - and head back to the Balkan Sunflowers flat, with errands on the way. We realize that he had last picked

me up at the Prishtina Airport; I thought it was the WFP flight when we reflected together on the loss. But I remember that my return flight had been on a commercial airliner, though I went out on WFP. Reaching for significance, I suppose. There is enough without reaching.

For an international it is safe here. If you took Albanians killing Serbs and Serbs killing Albanians out of the equation, the murder rate is very low; even with those killings included, it is, last I heard, lower than in DC or Johannesburg. Physical violence is rare, though property crime is on the rise. The winter is setting in. People have needs. In the five months since NATO troops entered Kosovo, with international aid workers often less than a day behind, only one international has been murdered. A Bulgarian UN worker, newly arrived in Kosovo, spoke Serbian (Bulgarian?) in response to a cigarette seller's question on the street outside the Hotel Grand Prishtina. For whatever reason, he was fingered as a Serb wandering too freely in the middle of the city; a mob gathered and assaulted him. Then a youth pulled out a gun and shot him.

I give a new volunteer her orientation. It's safe - but play it safe. Don't drive between cities at night. Be with someone else if out at night. Let your house know where you are. Don't take rides from strangers. We are unable to work with minority communities in Kosovo at this time: we do not have the infrastructure of security for such contacts. Who knows what the loss will be. An Italian company's plane, flying from Rome, goes down; loss comes closer, as it has for most of the population of this place over the last year. But random.

* * *



Eight Cooper family members are sitting with their two Kosovar hosts around a table meant for six. Big bowls of soup and rice sit on the table. Alan introduces himself and his wife Sally. I hug Katie (19) and Sophie (17) who have been working in Peje since September. They rode down

here from Amsterdam with their brother Casey, who coordinates the Balkan Sunflowers Peje project. Since then they have created a drama club with children living in collective centers (dormitories housing returned refugee families who cannot return home), worked on our arts center project, led children's activities at the three centers, and cooked great dinners. We are introduced to the other kids: Will, Cecillie, Ariela, Abel. Abel is six. They arrived yesterday in Skopje from California. They've come for a month - though they already talk about moving here for a year. I admit here I stumbled upon a Cooper email. "We are so proud of you." Of course, when Casey, Sophie or Katie have not reported home for a while, email inquiries flow.

For months kids have been coming to the Peje Sunflower door shouting, "Casey, Casey." Wherever you go, though, in Peje, a city of 60-70,000 people, kids call out, "Hey, Casey!" from 4th floor windows, across the street, across the park. Also, "Katie, Katie." Sitting in the Peje living room, I hear, "Abel, Abel." I don't know "Can Abel come out and play" in Albanian, but one day into his Kosovo experience, Abel from Mt. Shasta, California is playing with little children whose farm homes have been burned, and many of whose fathers are missing.

I have not been around "relief" and "development" work long enough to know how often something extraordinary happens; what Balkan Sunflowers has done in Peje is extraordinary. Stepping back a moment for comparison: In Kosovo we work/play with children in six collective centers (refugee housing), a handicap center, and a couple of schools. We are renovating three city parks, provide free cinema cartoons in two cities and movies at night (the only cinema in these towns!), a drama club, music programs, concerts, major implementation of Rights of the Children day celebrations, an environmental art campaign, playground installation, coordination of a city sanitation initiative, a major mural project, concerts, football tournaments, and more. For many children and their families, we're



in charge of morale. There are twenty or so volunteers at any time doing this. All of our efforts in Kosovo cost less than the salary of one UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo) policeman. A lot of results for every dollar donated. (If one counts the cost of what the volunteers donate themselves: air fares to get here and sacrificed income, then, of course, we are a more expensive operation.)

Peje started simply: "Let's do something with the park," Casey said in July. Karagaq Park was a circuit of trails, including an empty pond, a partisan war monument, remnants of a playground, an asphalt lot. It was overgrown and unused in July, bordered on one side by bombed out barracks and police headquarters, and on two sides by blocks of burned shells of houses. A simple initiative to clean Karagaq faltered over and over trying to get mine clearance. In August, with clearance given, photocopy posters around town announce a park clean-up. Would anyone spend their Sunday cleaning a park when faced with the ruins of their homes?

Hundreds of children show up in Karagaq. They contest for the rakes, brooms and shovels provided by the Irish organization GOAL. They run off with empty plastic trash bags, return with them full and get new ones. They pick up piles of trash, and throw the wrapper from a just eaten chocolate behind them - perhaps we have not explained the concept? UN staff come to work beside the children and their parents. The German Red Cross provides lunch. Football begins on the pitch; a circle begins to keep a volleyball aloft. Casey plays guitar and children sing. Karagaq is clean, if only briefly. More important, it is open, available for the people of Peje to use again. Internationals and local people have sweated and played together restoring the park.

Our Peje group builds on the park. Children from the collective centers through the summer and fall are taken there daily for games. A fundraising football tournament is held there. Cleanups. UNICEF funds our

renovation program including new park benches and tables, restoration of paths, clearing; then restoration of two more parks. An urban environmental awareness program, built on what has happened in the parks; an extraordinary playground built with an English group, Partnership for Growth. On 20 November, the 10th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Children, 5000 children march from Peje's UNMIK headquarters to Karagaq Park. They carry art created in our awareness campaign art program; they mob the playground; groups of our kids participate in the concert and performance program (managed by Free Artists, a local group that Casey started) among the 40 performances, drama and music begun in our arts center program. The gym hall at Karagaq, renovated by Concern, is hung with 20 oil paintings made for the day in a program initiated by one of our volunteers, Eric Schoeffler.

Alan and Sally have made Peje their own, as well. Chiropractor and massage therapist, they are treating a widening circle of friends and neighbors in Peje. Alan seems to have a facility for the language that may exceed even Casey's... and Casey exceed a benefit concert for the art center in English and Albanian a month ago! Convinced that their life in California had become too comfortable, too easy, leaving a supportive community they ventured to Peje to visit three of their kids.

It's no sacrifice to do this. One meets extraordinary people.

* * *

I arrive back in Prishtina after two weeks away. I feel like I'm coming home. I like it here - many warm people, extraordinary smiles, cafes packed at all hours - which I like in theory -- and work that I want to do. But there is gunfire. Lots of gunfire. No one seems concerned. No one looks around, runs for cover. Have things changed so much in two weeks? In Albania, celebration includes guns fired in the air, any celebration. Every self-respecting male has his own



kalashnikov. And who is not self-respecting? The breakdown of civil society in 1997 led to the looting of the armories. Guns everywhere. There are apocryphal stories like that of the wedding celebration, guns blazing upward in celebration - and killing someone in the flat above. Surprise gives way to investigation: "What's happened," I ask a friend. "Why is there so much shooting now?" "No one's shooting. Firecrackers." That was a month ago.

Flag Day is the celebration to end all celebrations. I hope. The overture of fire crackers has been building for a month. It's a war zone. Explosions are going off constantly. Single roaring blasts. Rat-a-tats like machine guns. Small children and childish adults are lighting them - everywhere. They land on the grass behind me. I see a teen light one and toss it in a lazy ark toward the street. A car stops to avoid driving over a pending explosion. Smoke is everywhere. Shops are closed, each hanging a bright red flag with double headed black Albanian eagle. Cars race by, horns demanding, youths - boys and girls - sit out of the windows with flags out thrust. Sun-roofs open for two, three, even four patriots, flags streaming behind them. A truck drives by. Ten youths sit and stand on the roof, like a Delacroix, heroic in their intentions. The plastic toy guns of months past surprised me; these explosions surprise me. War was not the enemy here. KLA and NATO are heroes; the power of oppression came from the barrel of a gun; so did liberation. Peaceful resistance did not work. Cruise missiles did. People talk of cheering the incoming missiles and cheering the explosions. Perhaps there are traumatized children -- and adults - cowering in the arms of protectors at this battlefield din, but tonight the hosts of celebrants have a manic passion. On 28 November 1912, Albania won its independence. During Serbian rule, this occasion was not celebrated. Nor before was it ever so marked. This is something new, this outpouring, this urge for fire and explosion.

I'm waiting for the minibus home; Arbin stops to offer a ride. Yesterday he rewired

four lights and two electric heaters at the Balkan Sunflowers flat. He only wanted 10 Deutschmark (\$5.50). "I'm ashamed," he says, "to be Albanian. All of this. I thought I would be so proud. We have our freedom, and this is what we do. We had a peaceful march this summer. Why do people have to do this sort of thing?" Vans, cars, trunks surround us, red and black flags madly waving, horn and percussion competing. "I thought we were special. Now I just want to leave this place."

I hear Arbin's lament again in many forms. "What did we need all this noise for?" "I stayed inside and listened to music." "It is very disturbing." And explanations. "We could never celebrate before." Two months ago plastic toy pistols appeared in Kosovo. Thousands. Perhaps tens of thousands. Every boy had one. They shot small plastic pellets at each other constantly, though I can say no one ever shot at me and I don't think even pointed one my way. You never see one now. Perhaps the firecrackers...

* * *

The bus from Prishtina to Gjakova should be only two hours. No. It should be 1.5 hours, but the direct route bridge NATO bombed has not been repaired. There is another detour around another bombed bridge on the road to Peje, before going south to Gjakova. KFOR (Kosovo Force: NATO and other UN authorized military) blocks the detour. The bus turns back towards the Klina road. There's another KFOR roadblock; it heads further north toward Mitrovica. It turns on another road, heading towards Malisheva. Other KFOR diversions. Eventually, again the Peje road. Four hours to Gjakova. You rarely know why. If you can ask a soldier, the answer is often cryptic. I guess they do not know why either.

In Peje, Mohammed says that there was tension in Klina. For several weeks a mural was being painted on a wall opposite the UNMIK building. It would celebrate some heroes of their resistance struggle. On the day of the official unveiling, UNMIK de-



cided that the mural could not be uncovered. It might be controversial. That could explain why our bus was rerouted, except that for part of the journey we were routed through Klina. Still, who can understand strategy? Mohammed, explains the confrontation in Klina with irony, humor, exasperation and anger. He's 18, but his English was perfected by the Cartoon Channel (seriously!), his sensibilities shaped by war and employment with war crimes investigators. Articulate, gracious and funny, he wonders now if one occupier has been exchanged for another if more benign one. With a sense for democratic nuances, he wonders what UNMIK is about?

I like detours. The bus will travel down tiny country lanes, through villages I'd otherwise not see. Finally, one sees winterization. Rafters and beams are being built over the shells of houses throughout the countryside. Most still no, but far more than a month ago. Here is a village with five houses covered: new construction sheathed in UNHCR red plastic, where a month ago there was nothing. The plan is that of 120,000 destroyed homes, 20,000 will have new roofs sheathed in plastic and one room prepared for the winter. A month ago, there was little progress to be seen.

Turning in a small circle, beside the Peje cinema where we show movies and host concerts, I see six roofs being built. In the same small arc there are perhaps 50 visible destroyed buildings.

In Prishtina it is shop windows. The street leading to the government building was all broken glass a month or two ago. The glass is repaired. There is a bicycle shop. Another boutique. New racks in a third window. Two of the government buildings are in use: the provincial building and the city hall. Between them, a bombed out government building. Across the plaza, the bombed hulk of the Post and Telegraph (PTT) center. Behind PTT a completely destroyed street, simply too close to the seat of government when war came.

* * *

A memorial service for the victims of the WFP flight tragedy is held in the provincial building. I pass the guards and follow the stairs to an auditorium. It looks like an imitation congress hall, a place to hold student government meetings, the congress of a poor statelet. The seats are filled; the walls are lined by UNMIK policemen in the uniforms of their many different origins. The flight had several UNMIK police on board. On the back wall are banners of the organizations that lost staff: GOAL, International Crisis Group, Associani di Bambini, Tear Fund, Gruppo Volontariato Civile, Caritas. Short eulogies are delivered, including one that names each victim and their reason for coming to Kosovo.

At UNICEF I first see the list of names with Cecile, a wonderful program officer we work with. "Oh. Richard," she says. Anne sends an email from Rome: ... a wonderful man, she writes.

* * *

While I was in Italy, our car was stolen in Gjakova. KFOR and UNMIK were not sure who was the responsible agency. So it was hard to file a theft report. KFOR eventually signed our report, which hopefully will be enough to cancel the registration and insurance in Germany. I've been trying to find another car. Several senior UN people have offered sympathy but no car.

I take the daily UNHCR shuttle to Skopje, Macedonia. I dread the ride down. It should be 1.5 hours. Today it is 4. We sit in the shuttle with the border post not 100 meters distant; cars wait; one moves forward to the post; it sits there ten, fifteen minutes. Then some trucks are waved through. Three hours within 100 meters. The other side is worse. Trucks carrying commercial items, carrying humanitarian cargoes, carrying the lumber and plastic necessary for winterization, are lined back from the border as much as twenty kilometers. They wait in line 7 days to pass the border. They may wait days to return. Hired by the month by aid agencies, a return trip they should make twenty times per

month, they make three or four times. At 1 pm we pass the border, and pass the line of trucks, stationary, into Skopje. I have to go to Skopje for money. There are still no functioning banks in Kosovo five months after NATO and the UN entered. We ALL go to Skopje for money. At the bank, I stand in line at the foreign accounts window. One teller sits at a computer. Others, in their striped shirts, are busy with something. Multiple forms are filled out. I carry these forms to another line in front of another teller. This line takes a half hour. She then fills out more forms and passes them through a cubby to another teller. She counts the money out. Another comes in to double check the count. I'm handed the money and leave. Breeding a bank with post-communism is like mating an eel to a rat.

A day later. UNHCR says that the shuttle is still at the border. Five hours today. Out on the sidewalk I see James, whom I recognize from Prishtina loading another UNHCR car. "Are you going to Prishtina?" "Yes, but I don't know if we have any space... oh, heck, we'll make space." Terrific. "We have to pick up a generator and a convoy of 11 trucks." James is shepherding 11 trucks full of wood stoves. We pick up the generator and head toward Tetovo, traveling routes that normally take an extra 2 hours to cross the border at another location where trucks are not normally allowed to pass. We reach the border as its getting dark. James is running back and forth, talking to KFOR, to Macedonian guards, to border officials. He's getting his trucks across. Twenty minutes later, with eleven trucks, we're in Kosovo heading toward Prishtina. We talk about what we are doing. James says, "You come see me Monday. I've got a car for you. It's an older Nissan jeep, but it runs fine. That a problem for you?" No. That'd be fine. "You come see me. You hear?" I love people who know how to get things done.



skopje diary

Gary Ryan wrote the following entries from 23-29 May 1999.

23 May

So the question is can a 53 year old American guy of Irish decent, who came to Skopje, Macedonia, to help a bunch of Balkan Sunflowers Volunteers help some refugees of the Kosova crisis, really understand the situation in the Balkans and especially the situation in Macedonia, well enough to write a diary about the experience. The answer is I don't know, but I am going to try.

Now I don't know how long I can do this or if it will even be interesting, but I am going to write what I see and hear and experience and perhaps feel for as long as I can. I will try not to give you my opinion or some political persuasion. However I am Irish by birth and sometimes we just can't seem to help ourselves.

I am going to go out and experience all that I can of this thing called the Kosova Crisis. I am going to talk to any one who will talk to me and each day, I might skip one now and then, I will add a page.

I arrived in Skopje a week ago as a long term volunteer and already I feel like I have been here a month. That is not to say that I don't like it here, I like the place. There has been much work to do, and there is just such a heaviness of heart here. Kind of a group sadness that you can feel wherever you go. The last couple of months have taken their toll on this country. The old prejudices have been refueled and these diverse ethnic groups which make up the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are as divided and resentful of each other as ever they have been for almost 2000 years.

The burden that the refugees have put on this country can be felt everywhere. And the strain of being refugees can be felt in the camps as well as in the cities, where as

many as 2/3 of them are. They tell me they are a happy people who love to sing and dance and play. There is no one here who doesn't want it to go back to the way it was before the "War". And they seem to blame each other. Can human nature cause these people to come together, to realise that there is a bigger enemy, prejudice.

Perhaps all the international organizations and NGO's can show them how to have a different perspective. The world has shown up to try and make a difference here. The slowly it seems to be working. The humanitarian aid and assistance is beginning to come together. But as with all crises there needs to be more. This is just the beginning. As we get Balkan Sunflowers organized it is obvious that we will be here for some time. The work of rebuilding lives is now beginning and the world can teach a valuable lesson to these people. As we try to offer a sense of community and solidarity to the refugees in the camps and in the community, we need the support of everyone. We can and will make a difference, with all of us working together there can be no other outcome. Soon the first volunteers will come to Skopje, joining volunteers we will recruit from the community. Working together to offer every one the chance of a better life.

Danae Wright is here as a long term volunteer with me. She is a fantastic lady from the US who has been living in Germany for the last 8 years. She is fluent in German which has been a tremendous asset. She has a lot of experience working in other refugee situations in the Balkans and I totally respect her. She has a good handle on the situation here and has already in just a few days taught me a lot. And she is a pleasure to work with.

We are working together with extremely limited resources to arrange places and situations for volunteers to work. We have



already, in just a few days, set up 2 situations. One for 10 volunteers in Stenkovic 1 and another in the Rom community. There is so much need here. But we don't have any volunteers to fill those positions. We are trying to recruit from the local people and organizations that are here but we have to be able to support them in the field with food and lodging and we don't have the financial resources to do that. So we continue to work and wait.

Those of you who can't come as volunteers can help too. We as any organization have needs. We have an apartment office here and we have a phone coming soon. These things have to be paid for. Clothing, food, toys, medical supplies, and money are needed. We are now working on finding space for the things that have already been collected. Money can be sent to Belzig for now till we get a bank account here.

24 May

Today I spoke with an American journalist who was at the border this morning and he said there were more men crossing the border. Apparently they are not in very good shape. He thought they were more who had been in prison. The rumor is that the Serb police in Kosovo are abandoning their posts and the prisoners leave the prisons.

There was good news in the e-mail this morning. Some volunteers could be here the middle of June. That would mean that we could have our community center in the Stenkovec 1 camp up and running soon. I am sure International Catholic Migration Center (ICMC) will be happy about that. They are our partners in the project.

Ran into Martin, an Irish friend with AGAPE here in Skopje. He is here evaluating Church involvement in the humanitarian relief effort. He will go to Stenkovec with me tomorrow afternoon when I go to see Richard, my ICMC contact. AGAPE has aid, financial assistance and volunteers to offer. Perhaps they will offer some volunteers.

I went to find a modem for the new computer I bought the other day. \$90.00 for a 56k external and that is a really cheap one. I was told that I can order a pci card for an unknown price and that it would take 3 or 4 weeks to arrive. However we don't have a phone line in the office yet so I will wait till we do and in the meantime I will walk the 2 km to the internet café and spend the 200 denars or about 4 dollars it costs me each day to use their computers on-line.

I called Richard my contact with ICMC at Stankovic. He told me that they just had 2000 refugees come into the camp and there were another 7000 at the border. He has been working without relief since the beginning and sounded exhausted. He told me that the tent is not yet up and that the delay in our volunteers coming is just fine. Thank you Universe for little blessings.

Tomorrow my friend Eddie, who is a Kosovar refugee, who kind of grew up in Skopje, will come by and we will go to visit a house with 56 refugees. As I understand 46 of them are kids. They have no clothing or food but the little they can get from the camps if they can get there. I also understand that some of them have either health problems or injuries from their escape from Kosova. So I will take along some of my limited medical supplies and do what I can. I also have some toys to bring for the little kids. Some stuffed animals I was able to fit into my luggage.

By the way I got word that we have tons of stuff like toys and clothing and art supplies and stuff in the US and no way to get it here. So any one who can help with that please. We also need places to store this stuff. I also found out from US Immigration here that Tower airlines, the guys who take the refugees to America, FLY BACK TO SKOPJE EMPTY. I know we have volunteers in America who can't afford to come here and what about all that stuff. Some one want to work on that one.



Any one with transportation suggestions for cheap travel to Skopje please contact Craig in Belzig.

Just heard on the BBC radio that 20,000 refugees have shown up on the Macedonian Border. Well I will have to check on that in the morning as I am fading fast here. It's late and oops I forgot to eat dinner. Oh well I can stand to lose a few pounds.

26 May

Today I had the privilege of working with the German Red Cross. They have the hospital at Stenkovec and I worked as a paramedic with a guy named Stephen, who drove the ambulance, and also is a paramedic. We ran the ambulance that takes refugees from Blase camp at the border to the hospital at Stenkovec 1.

When we arrived at Blase we were made to turn over our passports and questioned. They wanted to know which agency we were with and why we were there. I guess the fact that we were driving a clearly marked German Red Cross ambulance wasn't a clue. They let us in and we went directly to the Medicin del Mundo (Doctors of the World) tent. Right off we had 2 patients to transfer. One was a foot trauma, and the other was a man in diabetic shock. We loaded up our patients and headed for the gate only to be stopped by the Macedonian Police and a small lady "Doctor" from the Department of Health. A UNHCR official by the name of Marco happened to be on hand. And after a long and ridiculous argument with this "Doctor" it was agreed that we could go, but only with an armed policeman on board. And only after the "Doctor" had examined our patients and agreed with the doctor's diagnosis. She also told me that I was a big shot Doctor who was trying to show her up because I had a stethoscope. I didn't say a word, but thought plenty.

We finally went on our way to the hospital and arriving unloaded our patients and made the cop sit in the ambulance with his

gun, and bake in the sun, while we went and had some coffee. We also looked for a patient that had been sent a couple of days before and was to be taken back and reunited with his family, but we didn't find him. An hour later we drove back to the camp with a very warm cop and the real paramedic kit we were finally given. I hope we never have to use it.

We spent the rest of the day helping the Doctors and nurses with patients in the camp. Things like foot ulcers from walking for days, toothaches, a camp worker who cut his arm pretty badly, and various other medical complaints. I helped the nurses evaluate some refugees being transferred to Albania.

There were some quiet times and during one of these we heard some explosions coming from the other side of the border and lots of planes. So we assumed that NATO was at work. We also heard rifle and pistol shots from the other side, and only hoped it wasn't the FRY shooting at refugees.

The day ended with another incident with "Doctor". We were supposed to transport a little 5 year old girl with Esophageal Stenosis. She was only able to take fluids and needed to have a balloon dilation. Three years ago she had swallowed some acid and burnt her esophagus. She had had part of it removed. The "Doctor" argued that she could not be diagnosed in the camp, and we explained that her parents had a medical history with them. She went to examine the girl and after reading the history agreed. Just then Ann, the MDM nurse in charge of seeing that families stay together, came along to tell us that she had just arranged for the little girl and her whole family of 12 to go to Stenkovec 1 hospital and from there to Belgium so she could have the surgery she needed. They also have relatives there. Again the "Doctor" objected saying that only one family member could accompany the girl. When we explained that Belgium was a foreign country and that the entire family would

be out of Macedonia, she reluctantly agreed.

We headed back to the hospital empty and I got a free ride to the Continental hotel for the UNHCR Community Service Meeting.

There was a smaller group of NGO's there than last week. But the work that they are doing is sometimes monumental. There is a new camp being built on the north west side of Stenkovec 1. It will house a projected 20,000. It is being designed to overcome all the problems that were encountered in Stenkovic 1&2. So far Mercy Corps will handle distribution. And OXFAM will handle community service.

27 May

This morning I went back to the German Red Cross only to be told that I wasn't needed because they were not going to supply an ambulance to the Blasé camp. The reason was that they had not sent enough patients to the hospital. They are under the impression that the refugees are very healthy and that they are not really very needed. Since I had questions about that I hitched a ride to the border with Doctors without Borders. I arrived and was let off in the road. I went down to the camp expecting to be hassled by the police. Instead I was warmly greeted and allowed to pass without any interrogation. I guess the cop who we traveled with yesterday told them I was ok. That is only a guess, but the police guards were so friendly I almost didn't recognize them.

I went directly to the Doctors of the World tent and after fighting my way through a throng at the entrance I found nurse Ann. She looked quite exhausted and she described a busy night, which included the delivery of a baby because they couldn't reach the German hospital at Stenkovic 1. As I understand the labor started at 11pm and the delivery occurred at 5 am and the baby and mom were transported by Macedonian ambulance in the morning. It took 30 minutes for the ambulance to arrive.

They had been trying to call for help all night on the only cell (mobile) phone they had. No wonder the German Hospital doesn't think it's needed. No one at the border can communicate with it.

The Doctors of the World are very concerned that when they send nursing teams into the "no mans land" that the Macedonian ambulance will not go there if needed. They asked me to communicate that to the German Red Cross.

A group of 60 refugees crossed during the night. Several men had been beaten badly and one was passing blood. He and one other would have to be transported to the hospital. I met with the Doctors and told them I would go back to Stenkovic and communicate the communications problem. I hitched a ride with the Albanian Mother Theresa society. They were delivering children's vitamins and Space Blankets. They were given to Doctors of the World and the Macedonian health dept. The ones given to the Macedonians were promptly carried off to the police guards tent. For some reason I don't think there will be many refugee kids getting those.

Arriving at Stenkovic 1 I went directly to the German Red Cross. Ursula was at Stenkovic 2 and talked to Devin, who said he would personally take care of passing on the message. I then hitched a ride into town with UNICEF and went to the cyber cafe to answer e-mail. Yes I still don't have a phone at my apartment. Danae is really overloaded with administrative stuff. I am paralyzed.

The landlord, who is the head of the Philosophy Dept. at Skopje University apparently took our apartment office phone because he was afraid we would make international calls. "DA" He is also Macedonian. So we are still looking for an apartment that has a phone. We could also use a pc-mcia modem. 3300 would be fine as the phone lines here won't support faster than that.



For any one who wants to send things to us DHL ships here, and so does fed-x. DHL seems to be best. I hope soon we will have a good address to send to. I hope to have a bank account here soon. Until then any donations for us can be sent to the bank account on the web site in our name.

I am going to bed early tonight, as I am very tired. Like 11pm. What a treat.

29 May

Last night I had a major shock and disappointment. Danae stopped by to tell me that Sunflowers is closing the Macedonian Project due to lack of funds. Is this a fucked up world or what. We actually can't afford to do humanitarian work. Like that should be something you have to pay to do. It is not a luxury. Every one has his hand out. Making money from the pain of others. Funny I never see the guys with their hands out in the camps. I wonder how they would feel if it were their countrymen in those camps.

Perhaps soon it will come to the point where when an old lady falls in the street and someone goes to help her the "help police" will come along and hand the good Samaritan a bill for his act of mercy. Perhaps we could put up help meters, like parking meters, near the camps and you could pay as you help. That would seem to me to be the fair way. That way the actual helpers could be charged, and those who sit back on the hotel meeting rooms and talk about helping but don't actually do any helping wouldn't be unfairly charged.

I wonder sometimes when the prejudice and bigotry will end knowing full well that in itself is a stupid question. We learned that in the 70's, if we were paying attention. The Macedonian people are for the most part prejudice against the Albanian Kosovars. Many of them think that the "war" as the fault of the Albanians. They think of the Albanians as dirty filthy people who, as one person told me, "never shower and just have babies". She said the purpose of all the babies was to overrun

Macedonia and Yugoslavia like they did Kosova, and take over the entire region. Some of the Macedonian men I have talked to see the refugees as cowards who ran away without putting up a fight.

One of the things I constantly hear from Europeans here is that I, as an American, couldn't possibly understand the situation. Yes how could I as an American possibly understand people from different countries living together in one place and experiencing resentment and prejudice from each other and the ones who lived there when they came. Why no I could never understand that. In a way they are right I can't understand a prejudice that allows you to hate another to the point that you take everything they have worked all their lives for and drive them from their homes and country, and kill the men and rape the women and terrorize the children and destroy the land. That is what I can't understand. Perhaps it's too basic for me to understand.

So I will have to decide if this is over for me or if I will continue on in Albania. Can I actually make a difference in the lives of some refugees or will I just wind up in more meetings talking about how we might do that.

I really have to apologize for not writing. I thought I was finished by order. I find out that I am just being transferred to Tirana. I was really scared about it at first and almost went back to the US. But then my partner Tamara gave me the support and strength I needed to go on. Thanks for that. I have a special prayer I do when I need strength.

The light of God surrounds me
The love of God enfolds me.
The power of God protects me
The presence of God watches over me.
Where ever I am God is
And all is well.

I just needed to remember that and I was fine.

I will have to travel light to Tirana. It is a 8 - 10 hour trip by bus. I have a whole suitcase full of stuff that I intended to send back to the states till I found it was going to cost me \$310.00 to send it. I can buy that stuff 3 times for that. So I will donate it to the refugees.

I want to send a special thanks to one of my fund raiser Kay in Colorado for working so hard to raise money needed to carry on this mission. Thanks Kay I love you. You are one of the special people in this world.

I don't want you to think that Macedonia is dead. Danae is staying here and carrying on our mission. When we have the funds and volunteers to do it Macedonia will be back. All our hard work is not totally lost. We will return, as McArthur said. LOL

There was a Pro Serbian Peace Concert here last night. With Serbian Folk songs and such. I felt like cutting their power lines. It was in the square by the foot bridge. Well known Macedonian artists performed and the usual pandemonium followed with guys shooting guns in the air. No one was hurt. Thank God.

This may be the last Skopje Diaries for a while. I don't know what conditions I am going to in Albania. I might be able to write a little from there. If any one is interested that is. I know there are 5 international volunteers there. The first ones. I can't wait to meet them. There is a lot of work to do and we will get done what ever has to be done.

So TTFN and the next time you hear from me I will be in Tirana, I hope.



a return trip

Jonathan Hoffman, May 2001

Well where do I start? I do not have as much time as I would hope to get this off so I will try and be complete. I must warn you that it will be a lengthy one so save it for later if you have to.

My trip over was fairly smooth except for in Vienna. The plane was full and waiting for one last passenger whose bags were already on the plane. when he / she did not show, they had to have each one of us disembark the plane and identify our luggage. This added an extra hour to the delay. YES!

The next day Rand, Liriejta and I took a drive into the country to try and locate the Berisha family. This is the family whose last name I thought was "Fala". Oh well, wrong name, right family. they were still at the same location as last summer. The children are well, mom said that she has not had to take one to the doctor in over a year. Not bad for seven children. They looked well, thin, but happy.



They are attending a new school that was built in the village and all are getting good grades. They recognized Rand right off, yes they said, we remember you as they made a motion like throwing a Frisbee. Then they picked up 3 rocks to show him that they still could juggle. As Rand mentioned later to me it helped him realize that all that the Balkan Sunflowers do with children here is not in Vain. They know how to smile, laugh, hug, juggle, be children.

They have new digs (house) that was built by ADRA an NGO in charge of reconstruction. I will tell you now that all 3 families I visited yesterday are families that we have helped in the last 2 trips, all living in new homes instead of tents. The goats that I bought for the Berisha family last summer died over the winter. The lone sheep that we gave them was used for a number of meals. I do not know how the rest of the livestock purchased last summer have fared but I will tell you that one of the goats bought in December 99 now has multiplied to 4, with 2 more on the way. I forgot to write down the families name but I can tell you the father was a member of the U.C.K. during the war. he now suffers from severe back pain and is mobile but not able to do much around the home. still they are well and doing as best they can under the circumstances.

The 3rd family is the Selemi family. The father died in the war leaving mom a widow, pregnant, with four young children. The family is well, you can see it on their faces, instead of frowns and stress they are smiling and warm.

I do not want to get into lengthy descriptions but I will mention that the Mother Theresa Society (MTS) has not been able to do food distribution because of a lack of donations/funding. I'm not sure why but they were the major link between a good number of families and the bigger NGO's (WFP,UNHCR,) who used their infrastructure to locate and deliver to families in need. In other words they will not be receiving as much food as they need in the future. Its too bad actually. MTS has been here the longest and had a number of local volunteers. It was a recommendation from MTS that brought me to the Berisha family as well as the others.

Yesterday was a very productive day not only because I was able to visit with the



Berishas and the Selimis. but because it completed a circle in a way. It was great to be able to check in on the families from the Dec.99 trip and see that they were well and had new homes. As we drove to visit these places I was also able to observe that not only is there a lot of new homes being built but also that most of the houses that had no roof in 99 are repaired and back in use. Instead of the tents dotting the landscape like last summer there are only a few and most of them are used for storage. remember that I have not traveled extensively this trip. But we did cover a lot of ground yesterday. I saw a sign put up by the E.U stating that they have rebuilt/repared 1200 homes. Sounds impressive until you realize that there are another 60 - 70 thousand homes that have not been rebuilt. sorry for the cynicism,... and my spelling! It appears to me that there are a number more homes that families have pitched in and redone themselves. This is good.

I have traveled here before in the winter and summer, now spring. everything is green. the trees are blooming, instead of children selling cigarettes along the roadside they have bunches of spring flowers instead. winter wheat is up. new ground is being tilled. There was not a lot of snow this past winter, so they will not fill the reservoirs from the snow melt, but they have been getting a lot of rain the past 2 months. not enough to offset the snow melt but it has helped the crops that have been planted this spring.

Only time will tell if they will have enough to get through the hot summer months.

Today I traveled with Milanka from UNHCR to Lipjan where there is a Serb enclave under the protection of the Finnish KFOR. The 1st stop was to a family whose brother kicked them out into the cold, I don't bother to ask why. That's not important. what is important is the conditions that they live under now. UNHCR was able to get them a tent and a small box container

that they have converted into sleeping/cooking quarters. 8 member family living in a box the size of a large bathroom/or bedroom. Milanka and I determined that it would be best if we did not give them all the money in one shot. Instead I left the funds with her and she will do some shopping for fruit, sugar, salt, juice, etc and drop it off each week or so. The reason why is that both mom and dad are heavy drinkers/smokers and would spend the money unwisely. I would be drinking if had to live like they were. The second family we helped today is a rather unusual case for us/me. It involved a Serb family that has a fifteen year old daughter who has throat cancer. She is but a whisper of the picture of her on top of the TV. in the picture she is an attractive young girl with long blond hair and blue eyes. on the couch she is a thin, pale girl with coarse hair who can only speak in a painful whisper. she is in need of a trip to Belgrade for treatment. some of the expenses will be covered by the Serbian govt/hospital but there are a few expenses that they needed to come up with on their own. approximately \$300.D.M. I gave them \$500. which should help cover the costs of the trip. They will be traveling by bus this Thursday, probably with KFOR escort to the border. These enclaves are not free to travel as they would like, if they were to leave the village on their own they probably would not return alive. This is why she/they can not try and find treatment elsewhere..

I would like to tell more, yes there is more but I have 15 minutes before I have to catch up with an old friend for dinner. tomorrow is my last full day here and will make a few trips to the bank to make deposits for F.K. and X.D sister school projects. that should give me the afternoon to tie up a few loose ends.

All is well, thank you for the opportunity to come back, hope that all is well where ever you are.

kolonija, gjakova 2001

Rand Engel

The road to Kolonija is a left turn barely 500 meters out of Gjakova (Serbian Djakovica) on the road to Prizren. On this dirt track we pass the offices and service buildings of Cabrati, the municipal sanitation company, and some of the waste dump they manage. A few Roma (Gypsies, in common speech) squat or sit at Cabrati's front gate. Ahead of us are a compound of tin shacks in front of a longer masonry building. The shacks and buildings are parts of walled compounds, as is common in this region, though less common is the construction method: walls cobbled together of sheet metal, and car parts, pieces of wood and wire.

But before this, an Italian checkpoint. Inside the cascading tumbles of razor wire a steel watch tower, an armored personnel carrier, a porti-potty. We stop, and our Subaru is surrounded by beaming brown-faced children shouting, "Erica!", "Kasper!"

(The Subaru has lasted almost a year now. Being one of the few Subarus in Kosovo it suffers for repair parts occasionally; but its rarity is proof against theft – the fate of three previous Balkan Sunflowers BSF cars. Now our cars are protected by such devices as rarity, the artistry of dozens of small children painting fantasmal scenes, and a series of dead switches and wheel locks. A recent theft effort on a newly arrived VW van was thwarted by a well-concealed dead switch. The thieves, with a leisure I would have thought impossible, dismantled a good part of the inside looking for whatever it was that was foiling their theft, before they finally left with the windshield.)

An Italian checkpoint guards Kolonija, a community of several hundred Roma, one of several Roma communities in the Gjakova area. Some can go about their lives in relative normalcy. But the Roma of Kolonija are despised by the local Albanian population. They are the people of

the dump – but more importantly, they are seen as having collaborated with the Serbs.

While the children hang on Erica and Kasper who come here weekly as part of our children's program – started in Kolonija September 2000, the Italian soldiers examine our IDs. The children climb on Kasper. They are laughing and playing games. The Italian soldiers continue to examine the IDs for some proof of who we are. The children attempt to pull us into Kolonija; the examination continues to see if we may pose a threat to this vulnerable community.

It is past 8 pm. We've come here for a party celebrating a circumcision. In Muslim communities the boys are circumcised not at birth, or after a few days, but sometime in their 12th or 13th year. It is an important event, celebrated by a party – which the young celebrant may not entirely enjoy. You often see a parade of cars driving through town, a boy dressed in bright silks, like a Gilbert and Sullivan Admiral, waving from the sunroof of his chariot – a BMW or Mercedes, perhaps rented or borrowed for the occasion – on his way to meet the knife.

The soldiers are trying to figure out what we are doing here – not on the list for this time of night. A tall thin handsome youth comes out to greet us. His shirt is tied at the waist, his face shines. He fits my fantasy for the "King of the Gypsies", or at least the heir apparent. He greets us all warmly. Erica and Kasper -- and Anne-Marie, who like myself has not previously been to Kolonija -- are waived in by an Italian. I remain with the car while the soldiers call back to the base. A boy of ten slyly mimics, in what I suspect may be flawless soldier Italian, talking on the 2-way radio. I play hide and peek with a young girl. Children are starting to climb on me. I have been

here ten minutes, so we are getting past the formal stage.

"Okay. You not on list. This one – Anne-Marie? – she not on list. Here. Erica Weitzman. She on list. Kasper Hoffman. He on list. You go base before next time come. Okay?" Okay.

I drive the Subaru the short distance toward the compounds and the party. The hide and peek girl runs beside the car. I spurt it a little, she zips forward; I slow, she deigns to slow.

When I enter the yard, the "Gypsy Prince" as I am none too politically correctly thinking of him, takes my hand leading me in to dance. As I usually need an hour of courage building and the intoxicating effects of half a beer to enter a dance floor, its intoxicating how quickly the whirl is entered. Here men dance with men, men with women, women with women. Each is possible, in a circle or in pairs, trios...holding hands, or arms draped around each other, stately practiced steps, or riotous movement. So for a while we dance. A glass of coke is put in my hand. A mother – perhaps 40 perhaps 50 – takes my other hand in dance. It has all the graciousness of formal society and all the casualness of a pool party. Her dignity is solid. Many of the women in these communities have been abused. Perhaps she has escaped that – or made it clear she would have none of it.

The sitting room of the house is small, perhaps 10 feet (3 meters) on a side. There are three mattresses around the perimeter of the room. On the largest, surrounded by mother and sisters Luan rests. He is the celebrant of the feast. He's a very sweet-faced intelligent looking boy. He smiles appreciation of a visitor. Kasper sits on a mattress near Luan, two small girls curled in various ways against him. Someone gets up to make space for me on the mattress. More coke is poured.

Sitting next to me is one of the patriarchs. He looks to be in his sixties, says he is 46. We talk families. The dignified woman I

danced with is his wife. He has ten children. Luan is one of the younger children. Another works in Germany. (He probably supports his parents and all the rest of the family.) Another lives in Suhareka (Serb Suva Reka), where they come from. "How are things in Suhareka for your people?" I ask. Okay. A nod of the head. There is kind of head nod here which I think everyone who stays in the Balkans for a while picks up. It expresses a kind of fatalism that is not bitter, but not without bitter-sweetness. It is minute, detailed, as if one's place in the universe is so well understood, that any large gesture would be grandiose and embarrassing.

He was trained as an economist he says. Here that means, business, at the faculty – the University. This is rare for a Roma. (A volunteer later tells me that he says many things...) These days most of their children do not attend school at all. Things are not good for his people. He has no work for many years. More coke is poured.

There are three adult men in the room now. Cigarettes have been offered many times. Another of the men has 11 children. The third nine. This community they say has been here around 30 years. I ask about the Roma in Kosovo. How long have you been here? Since 1420 he says. This is the first time someone has given me such a definitive answer to that question – whether or not it is correct. Indeed, the Gypsy tribes that left India approximately 1000 years ago did make it to the Balkans in the 14th or perhaps 15th century.

Young Luan is very quiet on his bed, moves restlessly, but little. He smiles occasionally. Whatever pain he feels he does not complain. I suspect now – and will have to investigate – that these people do not complain much. Perhaps on the city street in Skopje, the professional beggars – toothless grandmothers who have borne 15 children and whose grandchildren are legion, child mothers sitting on cardboard with small babies, ten year-olds who cling to you with one hand, the other outstretched for a coin – perhaps they com-

plain while working. But I suspect back at home, no. One of our volunteers once saw a little girl on the streets, in rags, begging, who she knew from her poor hovel where she dressed cleanly and behaved politely. The poverty was every bit real, but the street complaint was a show.

I go back outside to join the dance. The "Gypsy Prince" seems not to have stopped in all this time. The chains or duos weave. Drums are beat. The economist puts down a drum and takes up a clarinet. Erica and the Prince dance. I am dancing with a beautiful girl – 15? 20? – who keeps singing to me a small refrain from the music, as if it is totally hysterical. The dancing is the most unaffected sensuality I have seen in Kosovo. Men and women dress to display their bodies in Kosovo, but still there are boundaries that I do not understand – that are either different or missing here in Kolonija.

I borrow a lighter for a trip to the out-house. The door does not close, but it is dark. I flash the lighter to make sure I know ... where I am. Muck rises to an inch below the cut out. I'd rather be dancing.

The economist insists we go to his house for coffee. Do we have to? I want to complain, like a six year-old, and keep dancing, but Coffee it is.

There are photos on the wall of clear-eyed men wearing fez, with great handle-bar moustaches. Are they family? He says they are Bakshis, holy men. There are several kinds of coffee served in this region. The nice cafes sell makiato and espresso – frothy things with whipped cream or swirls of chocolate. For instant coffee there is Nescafe, a monopoly, announced by as many as 10 billboards within a mile or so of each other. And there is Turkish coffee: water is boiled in small cup-size brass or steel pitchers, broad-based but open on top, then thick grounds are added. This is poured off into a small cup in which a spoon will stand upright. Lots of sugar. Tonight we have Turkish.

Occasionally, volunteers have passed the night in Kolonija. To pass the night is to set off a stiff competition .. for who will be the host. To stay at one house rather than another is to ignite protests and insistence on spending another night with the alternative host. We, on the other hand, will leave this night, returning to the Balkan Sunflowers house in Gjakova, a continent though less than a kilometer away.

gjilan 2001

Rand Engel

Brian Erickson and Eileen Derby have left BSF now, having stayed in the organization and in Gjilan (Serbian Gnjilane) longer (8 months) than either of them ever intended. They arrived in September, 2000, at the same time in Skopje, for training. At the end of training, we drove straight to Gjilan. I took them directly to the Roma mahallah (mahallah is a Serb word, community). These days, mahallah may I think be translated more like ghetto, it is the place the Roma are precariously confined. In this case the mahallah is a few small alleys not far from the city center, where the remnants of the Roma population live. Before the Kosovo War, some 6,500 Roma lived in Gjilan. Most fled with the Serb population. Three hundred fifty remain. We had rented a small house in the mahallah. In our Roma project, Eileen and Brian were to join Mary Gillie, a physics student from Edinburgh University, due to return to school 6 weeks later. A week before, another Edinburgh student, Chris Len from Singapore, had left. We found Hugo, our Gjilan coordinator; I took a couple of photos of Brian and Eileen, their backs to me, bearing great packs, entering the alleys of the mahallah – and drove on toward Prishtina.

(In 1970, a Peace Corps trainer led me, walking and on horse cart from a dusty district capital – a capital with all the conveniences, such as a radio operator, three jeeps, and two diesel generators, where in the interest of civilization we taught our favorite restaurant how to scramble eggs – to the village where I was to be posted. Having found the right village, the volunteer left me with three men sitting about a fire. One of them had a big goiter neck, the great bulge found sometimes in that iodine deprived area; one of them had skin blotched in patches, like a dalmation; the third looked to be

the oldest man I had ever seen, a man in dreams of the next life, by one of his fine white hairs attached to this, with skin dry and folded like ancient maps. I wonder now if Brian and Eileen felt as hopelessly and miraculously abandoned as I did then.)

The Gjilan house had a kitchen, bathroom, and a bed-sitting room. It was crowded with Syleman's furniture. Our landlord was happily pocketing two or three times what we should have paid for it – but we had made the move into the community, where for the previous few months volunteers had been doing children's activities and English classes in the one room "school". The school was a dark room of cast off materials where some of the younger children sometimes attended classes. Adolescents who continued studies would travel daily to a Serb school some distance away.

Several of our volunteers had worked in the school since early summer. Chris Len had learned his way through every alley of the quarter, knowing the smallest circuits through family compounds. He developed lesson plans, helped print a Roma poetry magazine, and made a Roma-English-Albanian glossary. Mary Gillie like volunteers before her (Chris Wolfe, Chris Len, Jamil Majid), taught English, made myriad projects and activities with the children, drank lots of coffee in dozens of homes, and had become very attached to the small community.

If we had known what moving into the mahallah would involve, would we have done it? Brian said to me last night (as Eileen has previously, as Rachel now there three months repeats) that he would not have traded this for anything. He recalls reading a book about Freedom Summer, Mississippi 1964: he knew as a young

teen that for such a purpose he would serve in such a front line. Gjilan is such a front line.

Eileen and Brian took to their work. There were problems in the Mahallah. The old community leader, Tafek, resented our presence as he did not control us. We taught in the school but when a local boy lit a fire there, Tafek declared the school closed because it was not safe. He wanted more KFOR security provided. Classes moved to our small house: the bed-sitting room and kitchen now also became two classrooms.

Mahallah children and youth seldom left the Mahallah. On the streets many Albanians give them dirty looks, call them mahgjup (black), make threats. Grenades have been thrown at their houses. Most Roma say they did not have problems with Albanians before the war. But the Roma are seen as collaborators with the Serbs. They paraded in Prishtina in support of Milosevic; they worked with the Serb paramilitaries, some claim. Our Peja landlady says to me, "they killed Albanian babies. Not in Gjakova. There they were good, but here..." To their centuries old outcast status is added the collaborator stigma. Though many suffered the same fate as Albanians during the war, victims of Serb forces -- killed, homes and villages burned, refugees -- they became the targets as well of returning Albanians, seeking revenge. Roma call the Kosovo War their worst catastrophe since the Holocaust.

Roma kids had briefly attended programs at the IRC (International Rescue Committee) youth center, and made contacts with the Human Rights Club formed there. But that did not last. The taunts and threats on the walk there discouraged and frightened them. They stayed in their few safe alleys. Eileen, Mary and Brian helped arrange participation in "Youth Week". The kids ran -- along with Eileen and Mary -- in the marathon. They participated in the judo competition -- and won. They were also separated from

other kids by zealous security. There were humiliations.

Brian and Eileen began finding that they could not eat at home. If they did not join a family for food or coffee people were upset with them. The older youth were their friends, the kids' families, their families. Within three months they were engaging in Romany conversations. The English classes lost their formality -- if ever there was any. They became small groups of 3 or 4 kids, a group in the kitchen and another in the bedroom, talking about anything. As many as six hours per day for a while.

They walked with kids to a computer center where they had arranged lessons. They organized an Albanian class for some of the children (who speak Romany and perhaps Serbian). They found a few cafes that did not harass them where they could go with the older youths for coffee. More and more they walked out into the city with the Roma youth, giving them a chance to be out of the Mahallah.

There was a price. On the street, people stared. Spit at their feet. Called the women volunteers "Roma whore." They felt the tear at their hearts of the discrimination against their friends. And they shared it as they found themselves not welcome in more places and subject to more hostility. For those of us not directly involved, it was difficult if not nearly impossible to recognize. Albanians are for most of us, our friends, our gracious hosts, the victims of a terrible apartheid system, and then ethnic cleansing and scorched earth terror. Nor was it easy to understand the duality opening up in our position in Gjilan. Hugo was the darling of Gjilan: fluent in Albanian, creator of the city park, married to an Albanian wife, provider of work. But our volunteers with the Roma were living in a hostile environment.

In November, an agreement was made with TMK to build a second floor on our home in the Mahallah -- to make it a

long-term Resource Center for the Roma community. TMK would use the project for training corps members in construction. It would also be a statement of TMK's commitment to a multi-ethnic Kosovo. Now there were a few uniformed TMK every day in the Mahallah, helping to build a center that mainly Roma would use. We hoped that the presence and involvement of TMK would send a strong statement to Gjilan: people they respected who had been part of the armed resistance against the Serbs, were helping to make a place in Gjilan for the Roma. Perhaps that has been too much to hope. While the organization has made this gesture, and individual TMK have been involved, the situation in Gjilan has not improved. On 28 May, the Resource Center opened for expanded use. Rachel Zedeck, who fell in love with "my babies", the young children of the mahallah, who came for a month and is now into her third, steered the construction project to completion and prepared the launch. The opening ceremony, with TMK, the Roma, the Roma youth dance group, was covered by Kosovo media. Perhaps this positive message will be of some benefit. A hopeful step: the first kindergarten school enrolment includes 20 Roma and 8 Albanians, a mixed opening class.

In December, Brian and Eileen told KFOR that a 12 year old girl who lived two doors away was repeatedly being abused. KFOR told the police who took the girl away for a night. The police discovered that there were plans to sell the girl to a 37 year old man for alcohol. When the little girl returned with new shoes and a police guardian angel (prepared to be an avenging angel if she was further abused), Brian and Eileen became her lifeline to her angel. As concerned as they were for their little neighbor, they also realized that their own security was of increasing concern.

Efforts to form an organization for women in the mahallah had led nowhere. Outsiders had little influence there. Our volunteers invited women to their house to talk. A women's NGO did develop; now they are participating in the resource center, particularly beginning a kindergarten that will happen in the new center, and in the process finding more confidence in themselves.

The city park is a favorite destination. Rachel began weekly park outings so the Roma children could enjoy the park that Balkan Sunflowers built. These are not simple outings. As many as seven police take part. It is a large park. The police play with the kids, but their presence is to provide security. Children come throughout the week to Rachel, "Parku, Rachel? Parku?" There is a special interest in the brief excursions from their three small alleys.

Young Roma have a dance group. Brian found money from friends in the United States to rent the city theater for a performance. Funding was found for music equipment. Through months of practice, they worked on their performances. When their costumes were stolen, money was found so they made them again. In March they held their fundraiser performance in the city theater. The kids continue to practice.

Is it, I wonder, at all patronizing to mention that Brian is 21 Eileen 22? When heart and soul are in abundance, I hope that noting just one more detail is not out of line.

The Gjilan Roma Resource Center officially opened May 28.

kosovo/a april 2000

Judy Haney

It's April in Kosovo/a,
and the Twenty-first Century Bar is jumping tonight.
All the perfumed boys sing their anthem, "Born in the U.S.A."
Each one pretends life is
normal now while
they slam down their shots and beer.
Nelly, the volunteer from France,
floats by in the dream of a dance.
Rhythm hard as guns,
throbbing base so strong,
I feel the boom in my stomach.

We sit outside
around a table meant for two.
Three Americans, one German,
a Nigerian, a woman from Belgium.
Right across the street
I see remnants
of a Serbian church,
an armored tank guarding its rubble.
Moonlight shines on the dome
breaking into a thousand brittle pieces
like the tears of all the children,
all the old men with their sad eyes,
all the solitary women
who rinse out their clothes,
rinse off their bodies,
clean up their lives
each day now.

Half a world away
my family sleeps
in soft beds,
peaceful, undisturbed.





refugee camp, march 2000

Judy Haney

Liridonia lives at the Brick Works Camp.
I meet her one day in March when I
trudge up the blood-red, brick path.
Her name means Freedom.
She is four now, plays marbles in the mud,
sings songs of childhood.
Inscrutable, detached,
she has seen families fall like trees.

She wears a second-hand dress
with hearts on the sleeves,
dances the circle dance with me,
but is wary with each step,
turns her body so she always sees her
shadow.

Liridonia is quiet. Looks away from
children playing ball or "Duck, Duck,
Goose".
Lives in another dimension.
She has make-believe friends,
and a few enemies, older children
who love to taunt and torment.

Her tender smile, unnerving,
she plays in fields behind the camp
with land mines left to tempt.
Their shiny innards glint in the sun.

This is her time to shine.
She blows bubbles with abandon
as her mother lies in the ground
with slit throat.
They drift away...
bursting into tiny specks,
iridescent light.

