

Serbian Diary

Jim Forest

In March this year Jim Forest visited Serbia. Here, in edited extracts, Jim shares his thoughts and perceptions through the diary he kept. Reading it through reminded me of the spirit of dialogue, openness and commitment to peace which so epitomised the relationship between Jim and Thomas Merton in the 1960's. In its own way the diary is a reminder of the call of the Christian to prophetic witness [Ed.]

Wednesday, March 9, 1994, Belgrade: Because of sanctions there are no flights to Belgrade. Jim Douglass and I flew to Budapest, then took a minibus to Belgrade. Having with us two large cartons of medication for children contributed by Franciscan sisters in Rome, we waited on the Hungarian side of the border with anxiety. Under the sanctions, medications are permitted into Serbia only by special permit obtainable through a complex UN bureaucratic process that takes months. After waiting an hour, there was spot checking of baggage in the van but luckily our two boxes were buried under suitcases and weren't opened.

Several hours later we arrived at the flat of Women in Black in the centre of Belgrade not far from a big outdoor market. The actual address is not publicized because of threats that women have received. Their postal address is at the Centre for Antiwar Action elsewhere in the city.

There must have been 15 or 20 women crowded into these two rooms plus a small kitchen. The place was bursting at the seams, everyone talking at once, the phone ringing constantly, and coffee being served. Among the many posters on the walls were photos of the vigil against the war that Women in Black have every Wednesday afternoon in the centre of Belgrade. After years of being saturated with news about murderous Serbs, it's refreshing to be talking with Serbs who kill no one, oppose all violence, and help the victims of war. Sadly such people are rarely noticed by the world press.

By midnight everyone was gone and we had the flat, suddenly intensely silent, to ourselves. For beds, we used two mattresses that serve as a couch during the day.

Friday, March 11: There is a joke about a Serb meeting a Moslem and immediately hitting him on the head, though the Moslem had done nothing offensive. "Why did you hit me?" the Moslem asked. "I was just recalling the fallen Serbs at the Battle of Kosovo," the Serb replied. "But that was in 1389," said the Moslem. "Yes, but I blame it on you," the Serb said.

The past is very present here and with Serbs at least has to be very much taken into account when one talks about the present and future. The propaganda machine that Milosevic manipulates so skilfully reinforces terrible memories which have made many Serbs feel they are a people the rest of the world wants rid of, or at any rate a people left alone to defend a Europe that doesn't yet understand the threat of Islamic expansion.

We had a visit this morning with Father Radomir Rakic, an editor and translator on the staff of the Patriarchate who is also active with the Church Relief Committee. He spends much of his time doing translation work for the Patriarch, but has to do it all on a typewriter half a century old. "This is my computer," he said, pointing to the huge black machine by his desk. At least it was well made. You could drop it from an airplane and still it would type. Only the letter A gives me some problems. I told him I would try to find some people in the Serbian Orthodox Church in Holland who would give him a real computer and printer.

Thanks to Father Radomir's help we were able to visit with Bishop Lavrentije of Sabac, a member of the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church. He responded positively to the interfaith pilgrimage to Sarajevo. He went on to say that the Serbian memory is heavily burdened with tragedies in the past that stand in the way of such gestures. "We cannot forget but we must forgive. We must think how we can live together as neighbours. We have to think what is needed for body and soul. For the body we must end the embargo. For the soul we must forgive."

Jim Douglass's fast began in Rome February 12, a prayer for peace in former Yugoslavia and for the interfaith pilgrimage to Sarajevo. He has been on fruit juice ever since. To connect this first part of the fast to Ramadan, he has been drinking juice only after sundown.

Because of this fast and the need to conserve energy, as he now tires easily, Jim stayed in Belgrade while I went with Jasmina Arsova to Pancevo to visit the Peace Action Group 'M' (M for Mir, meaning peace). Pancevo is a 20 minute train ride northeast of Belgrade across the Danube River. It's in Vojvodina, which under Tito was an autonomous republic with its president, but which has now been merged with Serbia.

The actions of Peace Action Group "M" include lighting candles and displaying a banner for half an hour every Saturday night in the town square, the text of which is "FOR ALL THE VICTIMS OF WAR." The person chiefly responsible for this simple witness, which has been going on since the war began, is Senka Mandrino. As we were carrying the banner to the square, she told me, "I do this for my country, the old Yugoslavia, not the new one, but the Yugoslavia for everyone."

Monday, March 14: A high point today was meeting Father Arsenije Nikitovic, a monk with a weather-beaten but radiant face who is the Belgrade director of an Orthodox Church program - the Peoples Kitchen - that distributes food to a thousand families who are otherwise in danger of starvation. His office, in a building linked to the main railway station, has been loaned to him gratis. "It isn't hard to find families desperately in need of food", he said, "And now we stretch what we give to 1100 families, but it is far from enough." He hoped we might help find someone to give them a van because they have a lot of delivery problems. And they need more donations of food. At present the main donor is the Lutheran Church in Germany. It was Father Arsenije's hope that I might find support for the relief work he is directing from churches in the Netherlands. Among other things he is urgently in need of a van for food deliveries.

Father Arsenije was overjoyed when he heard what Jim's wife Shelley is doing in Birmingham, Alabama, where Mary's House provides a temporary home for homeless families. He immediately gave Jim a big hug.

We talked briefly about the war. "Who is most guilty," he said, "I have no right to judge. Only we must do what Jesus said, to feed the hungry, to help and visit those who are sick. God will judge us for what we do and what we fail to do, and he will judge those who caused this suffering. He will judge, I cannot and don't even want do."

He told us something someone told him many years ago that has meant a great deal to him: "When you think there is no way out, keep looking and you will find three more possibilities." "I have learned he was right, thank God," Father Arsenije said. He also told us, "Whoever hits another person is not courageous, but rather the one who refuses to hit back."

Saturday, March 19th: Again and again people I talked with in Belgrade insisted that Jim and I had to visit at least one monastery. Bojan Aleksov, a draft refuser and member of The Orthodox Peace Fellowship who is one of the several men working with Women in Black, told me it was a sin to come to Serbia and not to experience one of its centres of spiritual life.

With all our meetings in Belgrade, such a trip seemed impossible. Then Bishop Irinej of Novi Sad

sometimes described as the Foreign Minister of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the “right hand of Patriarch Pavle” - invited us to come with Father Andreas to the Kovilj Monastery and meet with him there after Vespers.

At the Kovilj Monastery, which lies in southern Vojvodina, we found a finely-made stone church in the Byzantine style. The fifteen monks living here, most of them adult converts to Orthodoxy, are a young community. In the last part of the Tito era, only two elderly monks lived here. For years the monks’ cells were used by Serbian artists, and still there is a close link between the monastery and both intellectuals and artists.

Bells summoned us, along with about a dozen other guests, to join the monks for Vespers in a small dimly lit chapel. Through several small windows there was a view of an orchard.

Bishop Irinej, spiritual father of Kovilj, was present for Vespers. At the end of the service he spoke in his surprisingly quiet voice about the deeper meaning of the Great Fast that had begun that week. "It is the season to clean our hearts."

With the abbot, Father Porfirijie, and several other monks, Jim and I talked for more than an hour with Bishop Irinej, meeting in an upstairs room. He is a young bishop, thin, with a long dark beard, wearing thick glasses, speaking in a quiet, reflective voice. There is about him a profound gravity and a sense of grief.

Like Patriarch Pavle, he stressed that the Church must practice conciliarity - sabornost - in its actions, not unilateral gestures. If the Patriarch meets the Pope, it must be an action of the whole Church. "We Bishops must listen to each other, listen to our people, and listen to the other Orthodox Churches". He spoke of encounters involving the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church in Croatia as well as his own recent meeting with Pope John Paul in Rome. Regarding the latter, which happened "despite protests from our own people", he wasn't convinced Pope John Paul yet understands the principle of conciliarity that stands at the centre of Orthodoxy.

Bishop Irinej noted there were indications that the Vatican is changing direction and may become outspoken on the issues of sanctions. Days before the Serbian Orthodox Church had received a large gift of medical aid from the Catholic relief agency, Caritas, and there were meetings underway with Msgr. Paglia, a personal emissary of Pope John Paul. "What we wait for now is a clear public statement from the Pope so that our people and the world will know he opposes what sanctions are doing to us. We need prophetic steps from him."

I asked what signs of hope he saw. "There is no hope in politicians. They say one thing today, and tomorrow the opposite. If there is an act of terrorism, they immediately blame it on the Serbs and then, if later they find they were mistaken, they lose not a minute of sleep. Except for Christian acts of witness, I don't see any other light. There is a planetary illness. The only cure is spiritual. It needs prayer and fasting to make a decisive step toward repentance."

Toward the end of our conversation monks sang for us in Serbo-Croatian, Greek and English. Then outside the monastery we looked up at a sky whose stars, even to my book-worn eyes, seemed to be no further away than the roof of the church.

Sunday, March 20, Novi Sad: The city cathedral is in the Catholic architectural tradition and the iconography inside also shows the unfortunate influence of the baroque period and the era when Novi Sad was under Austrian rule, but the Liturgy itself, a three hour celebration, was intensely Orthodox. The church generally filled until there were hundreds of standing people filling the building, men and women, old and young. It was impressive to see nearly everyone receive communion. Afterward we had lunch with Bishop Irinej - for Jim consisting of one glass of mineral water - and then hurried to the train station with Father Andreas, catching the two o'clock train to

Budapest with one minute to spare.

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