

UPF Vienna, Austria's Peace Road through Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina

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Vienna, Austria -- UPF, together with its affiliated organizations, joined a Bosnian women's group on a Peace Road trip through Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Vienna-based group Mimosas Women's Forum traveled by bus together with representatives of UPF, Family Federation for World Peace (FFWPU) and Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP). A total of 40 people traveled more than 2,000 kilometers (about 1,240 miles) from September 6 to 10, 2019.

The purpose of the Peace Road trip was twofold: for the Bosnian women, who have been living in Austria since fleeing their nation's civil war in 1992, to convey to the Austrian participants the history of their country, especially concerning the Balkan wars (1992-1995); and to strengthen the reconciliation process between the nations and the religions of the Balkan Peninsula.



The trip started in Vienna on September 6 early in the morning. The first stop was Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. After visiting the neo-Gothic cathedral and walking through the historic city center, we had lunch with Ambassadors of Peace who had been invited by the national UPF representative, Mrs. Ji Suk Baek. Among the VIPs were Mr. Slaven Dobrović, a former government minister for environment and energy; Ms. Ermina Lekaj Prljaskaj, a member of the Croatian parliament; Ms. Zorica Gregurić, who worked as a volunteer nurse during the Balkan wars in the 1990s; and Ms. Akuoma Helen Boromisa, a Nigerian princess and the president of the International Women's Club Zagreb.

From Croatia we headed toward Bosnia-Herzegovina. We spent the first night in the town of Orašje, where we met a local women's group with whom UPF will keep contact.

UPF-Austria President Peter Haider had a meeting with Father Marko Oršolić from the Franciscan order, a pioneer of interreligious dialogue in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Father Oršolić founded the International Multireligious Intercultural Center (IMIC,), which is based in Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital. IMIC promotes interreligious dialogue and the discourse on justice and peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Southeast Europe.

The next stop was Belgrade, Serbia's capital. Mr. Slobodan Randjelović, the national UPF representative, organized a visit to the Nikola Tesla museum, followed by a walk through the inner city to the Kalemegdan fortress, from where we had a wonderful view of the confluence of the Danube and Sava rivers. As an Austrian, one can feel that the two capitals Vienna and Belgrade are naturally connected by the Danube, even though history seemed to have separated us. Over dinner we met local politicians, Dr. Zilka Spahić Šiljak of the University of Sarajevo, the WFP representative of Serbia, and a young colleague of Father Oršolić.

The main destination of the next day was the town of Srebrenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where in July 1995, seven thousand Muslim men and boys were massacred. We visited the Srebrenica Genocide Memorial graveyard and the memorial hall, formerly a building for UN operations, in which a survivor told the story of the genocide and how he survived. What moved us deeply was that he doesn't hold hatred in his heart but tries hard to forgive and reconcile.

We also met the women's group Mothers of Srebrenica, who spoke of their experiences. Their main goal is to help people overcome hatred and prejudice. After praying and showing our respect at these sad places, we were invited for a meal in the Emmaus community, a center for orphaned children that is a beacon of hope in this sad environment. Founded by Abbé Pierre from the Taizé community, it has been operating in Srebrenica since 2007.

Our last stop was Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina's capital. During a walk through the inner city we saw places of worship for Muslims, Christians and Jews. Mosques, Serbian-Orthodox and Catholic churches, as well as a Jewish temple, were within walking distance of each other, and we understood why Sarajevo is called the "Jerusalem of Europe."

For the Austrian participants, it was of special interest to see the site where the heir to the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, Sophie, were assassinated on June 28, 1914, which led to the start of World War I.

We also could admire the city hall, which was destroyed during the siege of Sarajevo in 1992. A few years ago the building was restored with international help coming from European Union countries, especially Austria, Hungary and Spain.

We were deeply moved by all the impressions of this journey, which one never could have obtained by reading books alone. Our group consisted of Bosnian women who had fled the war in 1992, some of their Austrian friends, and members of the Austrian UPF, FFWPU and WFP. The interaction of these different groups itself was fruitful and productive and opened ways to further cooperation.

