

Peace Day Celebrants Recall Balkans Peace Road tour

Elisabeth Cook and Peter Haider
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Vienna, Austria -- A Peace Road trip to Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina was the topic of discussion at a celebration of the 2019 International Day of Peace.

All the participants of the journey were invited to the meeting, which took place in the UPF Peace Embassy on September 29, 2019. Members of the Vienna chapter of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), an organization that is affiliated with UPF, were also present.

Mrs. Azemina Ahmetbegovic, a sister of the former Bosnian Grand Mufti Mustafa Cerić, opened the service with a prayer in the Islamic tradition. Bosnia is the place where Islam has existed for many centuries in Europe.



Mrs. Elisabeth Brandner, the main organizer of the trip from the Austrian side, explained the purposes of this Peace Road event. For the Austrians, it was a chance to come to know the Balkan region and especially the situations that came about because of the war of 1992-1995. For the Bosnian women, it was an opportunity to return to the places that caused them so much pain and to let go of those memories as much as possible. Another goal was to meet with local women's groups and peace activists and to stay in contact with them for future activities.

The first city that the group visited was Croatia's capital, Zagreb, and as Mrs. Brandner had lived and

worked there for several years, this visit brought back special memories for her. After Zagreb, the group traveled on to Orašje in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Belgrade, the capital of Serbia; and then back into Bosnia and Herzegovina to the town of Srebrenica and the capital, Sarajevo.

The organization Mothers of Srebrenica -- mothers who lost many of their relatives in the war -- made a deep impression on all of us, because they are making their utmost efforts to forgive their enemies and overcome hatred in order to create a better future.



After Mrs. Brandner's report, several of the Bosnian women spoke of their impressions of the trip. Their situations and the way they overcame difficulties were very moving for us to hear. One woman, for example, explained that she was born in Serbia but grew up in Bosnia. Her father is Serbian-Orthodox, her mother a Muslim. She feels love for both religions and cultures, and her hope is that other people also can feel love and appreciation for two or more cultures at the same time.

Another woman had moved from Bosnia to Vienna before the war, and when the refugees came from Bosnia, her home became a shelter for them, with up to 33 persons living in her apartment at one time.

Mrs. Fadila Alic, a writer, read a poem she had written about the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria as well as Srebrenica, the site of the 1995 genocide of more than 8,000 Bosniaks.

One woman recalled that her home had been in Srebrenica and she lost everything that her family had possessed. In Austria she founded a Bosnian dance group in order to preserve the Bosnian culture.

An Austrian participant of the Balkan tour, Mr. Manfred Hauser, was most inspired by the visit to the museum of Nikola Tesla, an inventor, electrical engineer, mechanical engineer, and futurist who is best known for his contributions to the design of the modern alternating-current (AC) electricity supply system. Tesla also was the pioneer of wireless communication. Although his inventions changed the world much for the better, he is not sufficiently appreciated or known outside Serbia and Croatia, Mr. Hauser said.

Dr. Afsar Rathor, an Ambassador for Peace who also participated in the trip, had worked with the United Nations in the Balkan Peninsula for several years. He helped to build facilities for civilians and refugees while the war was going on in Srebrenica and Sarajevo. After he returned home, it was not easy for him to realize how little the UN had been able to accomplish, he said. Returning to the Balkan Peninsula and facing horrible realities where they happened, such as the atrocities of Srebrenica, helped him to overcome his painful memories. "We have to forgive and even forget, and then we can look into a new future," he said.

Mrs. Elisabeth Cook, the Austrian national leader of FFWPU, said every Austrian should get to know the Balkans personally, especially Sarajevo, which is a historic city for Austria and Europe, as the breakout of World War I is connected to this place.

Sarajevo, called the "Jerusalem of the West," is a melting pot of cultures, namely Islamic, Jewish and Christian. It has an appealing flair which no one can resist, Mrs. Cook said. Between the minarets of the mosques you can see the Christian church steeples, and between all of these, there are buildings from the 19th century, reminding you of the time when Bosnia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The market is very Oriental, and the smell of ćevapčići sausages tells you that you are in a Balkan country. All in all, this is a place which one has to experience.

Mrs. Almira Čavić spoke about the Bosnian Pyramids in the area of Visoko, which were discovered only some 15 years ago.

Finally, Mrs. Azra Merdžan, the main organizer among the Bosnian women, thanked everybody for having participated in the trip. She came to Austria in 1992 as a refugee with two children and had to build her life from scratch. She felt very happy that she could organize this journey and that she could

visit her homeland with her friends from Austria and with the members of her choir from their women's forum, the Mimosas.



Throughout the program, Mr. Peter Haider, president of UPF-Austria, showed pictures from the different cities corresponding to the reflections of the participants. He said he was very impressed by meeting the Franciscan priest Marko Oršolić, a founder of the interreligious dialogue in Bosnia, who established the International Multireligious Intercultural Center (IMIC) in Sarajevo. He also mentioned that we had been driving beside the Drina River, recalling the famous book *The Bridge on the Drina* by literature Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić, whose memorial birthplace museum in the city of Travnik in Bosnia and Herzegovina we visited on our way home.

During the service we also had the chance to listen to Bosnian folk songs performed by the Mimosas choir, and for lunch, which was ready after the event, we could taste burek, a typical dish from the Balkans.

Through this trip we learned so much about our fellow citizens in Austria, as more than 300,000 came from the former Yugoslavia as guest workers, students, refugees, or immigrants. We came close to their culture, their past and present, and we could build precious personal friendships.

