

Coffee Pots of Hope

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“The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason for hope.” ~ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin ~

When Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union went through their period of transition, the glue that held Yugoslavia together came apart. Formed by a treaty after World War I, the nation of Yugoslavia had been glued together across ethnic, religious and cultural lines. Out of what was Yugoslavia, a handful of newly reorganized nations worked to create their governments and stake out territorial jurisdiction.

Hearing the Cries of a Nation at War

With a history of ethnic conflict, the region was filled with mutual resentment, fear and distrust that was easily reignited. The emergence of a self-governing Croatia was marked by a time of violent ethnic conflict that broke out into war in the southern parts of the nation.

European newspapers and television splashed images of the violence in the region on a daily basis. A group of RYS members and their friends in Europe felt an urgency to do something that would help alleviate some of the suffering. In cooperation with the International Relief Friendship Foundation (IRFF) and Forum East (Austria), they gathered resources and formed a team of volunteers. A camp in Varazdin, Croatia, run by the United Nations Department for Displaced Persons and Refugees, was selected as the worksite for an RYS project.

The Camp of the Displaced

The RYS project drew its volunteers from 22 countries. Many of the volunteers were college students on Spring break. When they arrived at camp Varazdin, one of the first things they noticed was that it was filled with the elderly, with women and with young children.

We soon learned that men and older boys were noticeably absent from the camp because they had stayed behind in the war zone to protect their homes and villages. For the people living in the camps, the absence of those they loved created an anxious longing that drained joy and vitality from their daily lives.

The camp was a world unto itself and, for most, it was a world full of broken dreams and painful memories. Multiple families squeezed into rooms that had the ambiance of a run-down barracks. Privacy existed only in one's thoughts. Material possessions were few and simple, often consisting of what could be carried away on short notice from their previous home. Memories of death and destruction became even more oppressive due to the gnawing anxiety of not knowing the fate of loved ones or the destiny of their community.

In contrast to the psyche of camp residents, our volunteers were enthusiastic and full of dreams. Most came from more prosperous and peaceful areas in Europe and the USA and lived lives free from the daily realities of fear, violence and economic displacement. Some of the volunteers wondered aloud about their personal ability to do something ‘for these people’—something that would really make a difference. Looking at the suffering before their eyes, they half-complained that they lacked the depth or ability to touch it, to ease it, or to provide anything from their own lives that would be of real help.

Needs of the camp residents

Technically speaking, those living in the camps were called displaced persons and not refugees. Displaced persons are those driven away from their homes to another part of the country, whereas refugees come from other countries. Although the UN did its best to care for those in their charge, the continuous influx of displaced families presented enormous challenges for the undersupplied and understaffed camp.

One example of the growing needs was in the feeding of the residents. The food that we shared in the dining hall was not enough to satisfy a healthy calorie intake. Part of the lethargy of those at the camp

was related to this fact. To supplement the diet, we contributed sacks of special fish powder that had been donated by our partner organization, the IRFF.

We knew that the fish powder was high in protein and that the IRFF had used it in Rwandan refugee camps where it was of great help. We received permission to add the nutritious powder to the large pots of soup and eventually used it in many of the dishes that were prepared. The fish powder proved to be an excellent supplement to the camps diet. Many residents noted an increase in their energy level and some commented that they thought they were starting to put on a little additional weight.

RYS Work Begins

We were charged with painting the large public dining room and the crowded dorm rooms where the families bunked together. In addition, we decided to fix the shared toilet facilities and transform a small storage room into a nursery. The hearts of the volunteers toward the work was filled with sincerity. Each person was determined to do their best to make things work and look better.

On the morning of the second day at the camp, we joined with the community for meals in the large dining hall. We were a little anxious because we were going to start our work and meet many new people. It was hard not to feel like strangers in a strange land. During the meal, a few of the more outgoing children from the camp ventured up to us to start some form of communication but soon language differences seemed to prematurely end the exchange.

On the third day at the worksite, the morning sun welcomed us with promise as the air clung to an early morning chill. Teams began scraping and preparing walls and ceilings for painting. After completing a few good hours of work, we neared the time when our teams would take a short break to have a light snack and socialize. It was at this point that a simple, somewhat funny, event took place that would change the direction of our relationship with the community.

Heart to Heart over Cups of Coffee

Adem and I were part of a work team that was painting the outside of a barracks. A few minutes before our team was called to have a break, we were approached unexpectedly by a woman who looked much older than her age. She faced Adem but inquired in a voice that addressed those in her presence, “Would you like me to make you some coffee?” Adem and I eagerly nodded our agreement. The woman quietly went off to prepare.

British born, Adem was of Turkish descent and his facial appearance was much like that of many of the ethnic Bosnians living in the camp. The woman who was making coffee for us took an immediate liking to Adem for he looked somewhat like her own son of a similar age.

Bosnia bordered Croatia and their populations mixed and overlapped throughout history. Much of the area had been under Turkish Ottoman rule for hundreds of years and there was much intermarriage. One result of this historic legacy was that children of Bosnians often had a strong resemblance to their Turkish neighbors.

Adem and I continued to work as we waited for the coffee to arrive. Then a shout from a staff member that our “official” time for a work-break snack had begun. The rest of the team was growing impatient and decided to leave the worksite and go to the area where the staff had prepared food and beverages.



As time passed, Adem and I began to doubt if the coffee was really going to appear. Maybe we didn’t understand what the lady was saying? Maybe we should leave and join the rest of the teams and have our snack?

After a considerable length of time, the woman appeared with her pot of Turkish coffee—strong Turkish coffee, the type you pour into little cups because big cups would be way too much caffien. Drink too much of this strong but tasty coffee and you may start to speak rapidly or, possibly, rush to a toilet.

Adem and I stared at the pot and the cups and after some hesitation quietly decided to accept the lady’s offering of hospitality. We were partners in the challenge to drain the pot of coffee that was prepared for the whole team.

As we poured and drank and poured and drank, the woman was pleased and began to share her story:

“My husband and two sons are at the front where the fighting is happening. I have not heard from them in over a year. It is so hard to get news from the front. I do not know if they are dead or alive. I hope they are alive, I feel they are alive but I do not know. I do believe they are alive.”

She was pouring out more of her story with each cup of coffee that we drank. At the point when we began to think we were close to the end of the pot, another woman appeared with another full coffee pot. She also was expecting the team but disappointedly found only Adem and myself.

Adem and I knew without speaking what lay ahead of us. By drinking the coffee we were showing our appreciation and covering for our missing teammates. These women with so little were offering what they could, and here they were sharing with us, giving their best.

So we drank and drank and mostly listened while these two women shared their stories. When the pots were near bone dry, the count was 18 cups for me, 22 cups for Adem. We would pay a price for this but the reward of having these women share their stories was well worth it.

The next day, the woman again appeared and offered coffee. This time we made sure that it was going to be shared by the whole team. The women continued to share with us as if we were their long lost relatives. On our last day at the camp, the women from the barracks prepared cake from their meager rations to go along with the now traditional coffee ceremony.

As the women in the camp gathered, they began to share through a translator:

“Sometimes people came to our camp and left things at our door. Sometimes we can use those things, sometimes not. It was clear they did not really care what we needed for they never asked. Your group came to the camps and worked, shared and ate the same food as us. You listened to us, you played with the children, you tried to help as best as you could. What I want to say to you is that, when you were here, we realized that we were not forgotten. Because of you, we had some time where we could put aside the war and just share life. Thank you for giving us hope.”

Discovering the Power Within

The words these women shared gave us insight into the deeper reasons for our coming to Varazdin. These women appreciated our fixing and repairing the living situation of the camp but that could have easily been accomplished by hiring professional workers. What the mothers really needed to know was that people still cared for them and they wanted to help. Our open-hearted service was personal confirmation that they were not forgotten, that they were indeed valued. This was a gift that money could not buy.

The insecurities of the volunteers disappeared as they realized they had much more to give than they had expected. Through the heart of service, they experienced the liberating power of giving hope. The volunteers understood more clearly that their lives were not simply for themselves but that they lived to help and encourage others.

Healing the Heart

The women of Varazdin helped to open my eyes and to bring me to an important realization. While fixing buildings for those in need is a virtuous activity, it is not the most essential part of our work. The most critical element of our work is to help heal the human heart, and to uplift and celebrate the human spirit. The women in offering us coffee from their meager supply, made a beautiful, selfless offering. By accepting the coffee, we were accepting their heart. They felt this and, in turn, were able to accept and appreciate the efforts we were making.

One year after our time in Varazdin, the fighting in the southern part of Croatia concluded. Most of those living in the camps returned to their villages and their homes. Our hopes and prayers were always that the women would have a grand reunion with their husbands and sons. Those in the camps profoundly deserved a chance to rediscover joy.