

Helga Dieter wrote a letter to her friend and journalist Katha Pollitt (columnist in the „nation”) with a report from a trip through the destroyed parts of the former Yugoslavia

Helga Dieter Flussgasse 8 60489 Frankfurt Germany

Dear Katha,

Frankfurt, 9.9.1999

I travelled a lot last summer: Germany > Croatia > Italy > Bosnia > Macedonia > Germany
I just came back from Zivogosce (Croatia), where the the peace-project

”Vacation from War”

was over three days ago. I have been very busy and did not write to anybody. Excuse me. But this summer I was responsible for the whole project, not just for the groups from Tuzla.

Alltogether there were more than 1400 Kids from four countries of the former Yugoslavia and I organized eight camps .First of all, I’m very glad, that there was no accident, no epidemic, all went back healthy and happy.

Six camps took place in Zivogosce at the Croatian Adria, like last years.

I’ll try to give you an impression of the political back-grounds and the special problems of each group:

1 The ”Centre for Peace” in Osijek / eastern Slavonia cares for the Serbian minority, who have lived in this area for more than 200 years. Since the war, the Croatian government (The Western-Free-World’s friend Tudjman) tries to declare them as displaced persons without passport or civil rights. Last year even the UN-assembly criticized the Croatian politics because of the persecution of ”their”Serbians. Our partner-organisation ”Centre for Peace” was honoured with the ”Alternative Nobel Award” (Stockholm). They took part at the camps for the third time this year with a group of Croatian and Serbian children from eastern Slavonia.

2. The Bosnian town Gornji Vakuf is devided into a ”Muslimic” and a Croatian part (”little Mostar”) In the totally destroyed ”no man’s land” in between, there is a youth-center, organized by international civil workers.The last years, children from both sides took part in the camps on the sea-side and many of them became friends. The invisible iron curtain got holes. Meanwhile even the teachers of both schools stay in contact. This summer you could hardly recognize who came from which side.

3. The most sensitive project this summer was a group with children and educators coming from Srebrenica / Srebrenica. This means ”Muslimic” children, who were deported from Srebrenica in 1995 had vacations together with Serbian children, now living in Srebrenica - mostly refugees from the area of Sarajevo. In spring we had a discussion in our ”Committee”, whether we could dare to put these children together and whether you can force the reconciliation-process from outside. But the resonance was great. It was like liberation. Everybody was deeply impressed .This camp really was of high symbolic importance for peace developing in Bosnia.

4.+5. There were two other groups of children coming from the Serbian and the ”Muslimic” part of Bosnia. By chance, some children from the orphanage in Banja Luka stayed together with some children from an orphanage near Tuzla. In this society orphans normally live together with a grandmother, aunt or neighbours. Two boys of fourteen years became friends. The one from Tuzla looks only six years old, he has a lack of growing-hormones. Because of the war he got no treatment and now it’s too late.These boys realized that they are orphans because (in theory) perhaps the one’s father killed the parents of the other one.

6. The last group in Zivogosce was organized by Franziscanian monks and nuns with Croatian refugees from the Serbian part of Bosnia. They focussed more on religion than peace.

7. In spring, the Nato bombed 50 000 Kosovo refugees into Bosnia where they have enough problems with their own displaced people. But Bosnian learned from the European countries how to force refugees back home. In July they gave them free return tickets to Kosovo and no more support in August. That's why we had notifications for 800 children in May and only 50 who actually went to the camp in August. None of them had ever been to the sea. Because they had no papers they could only stay in Bosnia. But there are just three miles of an enclave on the coast, that belong to Bosnia . In one of the three hotels I negotiated a reasonable price. When the children were already in the bus the hotel-manager called me and pretended that there are no free beds. (I guess that his director refused to have Kosovo people in the hotel because of racist reasons). This was a shock! 50 poor children on the road and no place to stay, and nearly no alternative because they could not go anywhere else. At least I found an accomodation in one of the other hotels. This was the most exciting moment this summer.

8. Most of the displaced Kosovo people have gone to Nothern Macedonia, where the majority has been Albanian for generations. For example, in Gostivar, where our partner-organisation "Amica" founded the first aid-project for Kosova-people. Nearby was the largest camp for refugees "Cegrane". In May there were about 40 000 people, living under unbelievable conditions. There were thousands of children, who wanted to go on summer-holidays. After the "implementation of peace" most of the men wanted to go back immediately to participate in the \$\$-rain and DM-cake. But many of the women and children waited in the camp until the situation would become calmer. You can see the camp "Cegrane" near the highway and in August there were still a lot of people there. (A psychologist from Switzerland, who has worked in the camp since months estimated the number of people at that time at 5.000) But because of political reasons the UNHCR asserted, that there are no refugees in the camp anymore and therefore no children could participate in our project "Vacation from war". But some parents took their children out of "Cegrane" to Lake Ohrid and they could relax for 2 weeks in our peace- camp.

There also was a group of Albanian people who have lived in Serbia for generations. When the Nato-bombing started, the police told them better to disappear before their neighbours would make them responsible and attack them. So 200 people fled for more than 2 months through Hungaria, Bulgaria and Romania to their relatives in Gostivar /Macedonia. They brought 25 starving boys to Lake Ohrid.

The atmosphere between Macedonian children and teachers on the one side, and Albanian/Kosova children and teachers on the other side, was rather suspicious and hostile. They complained that the other group got a ball or a water-matraze more and other silly things. It was very difficult to mediate and once I asked them very angrily and said , whether they needed another war to be able to come together afterwards., like the Serbs and Muslims in our camp in Zivogosce just tried.

9. We are very glad, that at least also the displaced Serbian children, who now live near Belgrad and who suffered under the Nato-bombs could go to Montenegro. Because of the war we didn't expect to get this organized this summer, especially because also the situation in Montenegro seemed explosive. But it took place! This was organized within a few days from our Serbian partner-organisation "Zdravo da ste", that cares for these children in the refugee-camps all over the year. All international aid is concentrated in Bosnia or Kosova, there is no help at all for the Serbian children living in worst conditions since years.

I couldn't go to this camp because you cannot go from Croatia to Montenegro without a visa for Serbia, which is very difficult to get. But a colleague from the "Komitee" succeeded. and took part.

I hope, I didn't confuse you with these details -and my bad English.

**Warm regards
Helga**