

STEPHANIE PERROTT – REPORT Zivogosce Summer 2000

For the past four years I have worked as a volunteer for the Committee for Human Rights and Democracy I find this work immensely rewarding. In New Zealand and Bosnia I have worked as both an English teacher and a manager for humanitarian projects. I feel the project undertaken by the committee is particularly effective and impressive. I do not know of any other projects in the Balkans where groups from different entities are brought together so successfully. This years camp which brought among other groups children from Srebrinica and refugee children who left that city during the war in one camp, and another camp where children came from Sombor Yugoslavia joining together with Croatian children a great step towards creating more peaceful relationships.

I sit in the dining room at a table with four small boys from the orphanage in Banja Luka. Four ten and eleven year old boys with sad life stories but cheerful spirits. We have just been given bananas to eat. We shoot each other with them “pow, pow, zip, zip.” “No, No” says Alen “these are not guns they are dolphins... Look” and he moves his banana like the dolphins we have seen frolicking in the bay. It has taken a child to remind me what these camps are about and what we are achieving transforming violent impulses into peaceful gestures.

It saddens me to discover how affected many children still are by the war that tore the Former Yugoslavia apart. One boy tensely describes how he watches the news every night anxious to hear what his politicians are saying, monitoring every statement for the possible hint of war. Others tell me how they never expect to travel like I do. Our country has been ruined by war they say we will never have a good life again. Things will always be hard for us. We will be lucky if we get an education and a job. Other childrens bodies seem to tell a similar story of despair. I’m not used to seeing eleven and twelve-year-olds with hunched burdened shoulders and wearied worried faces, but here there are plenty.

Many times the camps work a miracle on these tense small bodies. It is such a pleasure to see children become more relaxed and light hearted .To see anxious faces break into smiles. It is also such a pleasure to see children make friendships across ethnic borders. Admir a muslim boy has lost the key to his room and I think it is too late to bother his teacher. “Why don’t you sleep in a friends room”, I ask, knowing how much the children usually love bunking down together. His face turns sad “I haven’t any friends.” Three Croatian boys standing nearby chorus “come with us you are our friend.” One delighted boy heads off with his friends.

These friendships across boundaries work especially well when we have children from three cities but in every group I saw many new friendships formed with no regard to religious differences. Big Muslim girls fuss over and cherish little Serb girls. On one boat trip I see a Serb child sleeping in the arms of a Muslim girl. A Serb girl and a Croatian girl who come to my English classes become the best of friends. They are both very good students with a great love of music and seem so happy to find a kindred spirit. Before they leave the camp they have included a Muslim girl in their informal leadership/friendship circle. One child writes my father was killed by the Serbs and here there are Serbs children but they didnt kill my father. These children are my friends, we children didn’t make the war.

All one hundred and twenty children from one group go on an hours walk to the next village. We walk back together in the dark. For many of these children the dark is especially frightening reminding them of the time when they had to flee through the countryside at night. But this night is different. They sing together a medley of the latest pop songs. Singing here can often be seen as a political act with each religion claiming their own songs but these children all love the same

hit songs regardless of whether the singer is Croatian ,Serb or Muslim. They sing so sweetly together.

Jasmin is in my English class. The children are drawing their families. The first English sentence Jasmin speaks is “my father is dead.” So I ask Jasmin if he wants to draw his father in the picture. Jasmin draws and then tells us about his father, how old he was and his name. A few days later I’m supervising a drawing exercise with an open group of children. Jasmin approaches me and asks “can I draw my father again .” He then calls other children telling them “my father, my father.” He seems happy and proud.

In one group five children from one family whose parents were killed in the war have a chance to be together. Usually two of them live in an orphanage, while the other three are spread between two foster families. They explain that they rarely get to see each other . At first their interactions are stiff and formal, The older children seem burdened by responsibility but as they become more involved with the life of the camp they all discover how easy it is to have fun . The two eldest change from being serious and in charge into being happy fun loving children. On the night of the disco I notice that one of this family is not happy. She sits on the sidelines looking miserable. But no she is not mourning all the ghastly losses in her life her oldest sister tells me she is sad because she is IN LOVE.

It is this ability of the children to so fully absorb themselves in the present, to so enjoy what is provided for them at these camps that makes working here so rewarding. The children love the night when we go to the hotel disco. They dance and laugh the night away. It’s so special to know what these children have been through and to be able to see them so happy. Without the wonderful support of donors none of this magic, this chance for them to both face their losses and hardships but to also have a holiday from all the difficulties they have and do experience would not be possible. Please continue to be part of this magic.