

**COMMITTEE FOR BASIC RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY**  
**and**  
**BOSNIAN-INITIATIVE**

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**VACATION FROM WAR FOR CHILDREN FROM MITROVICE KOSOVO 2001  
HELD AT BAR AND ULCINJ MONTENEGRO**

It upset me greatly to see school children from the Albanian enclave in North Mitrovice patiently holding their arms up and turning forwards and backwards while soldiers moved a metal detector over them searching for hidden weapons. I hated undergoing this procedure myself. But for children to suffer it every day on their way to school on the other side of the river that divided this city into two hostile territories seemed absolutely inhuman. The only thing I felt I could do to help was to suggest a „Holiday from War Camp“ for these children and others in the tense divided city.

Organizing two camps one for 95 Serbian children from North Mitrovice and one for 100 Albanians from the South was an immense challenge. The children also came from surrounding areas harshly effected by the war. I traveled to isolated Albanian villages over rough unpaved tracks in blistering hot summer weather to choose children who had lost family members in massacres. It was a humbling experience to meet with their mothers prematurely aged, often still grieving and frequently living in unsatisfactory temporary accommodation without husbands, as they had been killed before the Nato bombing, but with big families of unkempt looking children.. No matter how far I traveled there was always a military presence. One group meeting held in a pleasant shady field was momentarily disrupted as a tank stormed by in a cloud of dust at a terrifying speed. "Don't worry said the mothers that happens every day".

In North Mitrovice children were selected a little differently as not so many Serbs have been killed in the conflict. Here I chose children who lived in enclaves surrounded by a hostile, unforgiving Albanian majority. Life in an enclave is constantly stressful and restricted. In one enclave the children must travel to school in a neighboring enclave in a large tank. Other children were chosen because they lived near the main bridge that divides North from South. Low scale fighting and conflict is a constant near this bridge. In the months prior to the camp Serbs erected barricades around this part of North Mitrovice and unruly protests were staged against taxation.

Ten Roma (gypsy) children were chosen from the North. They are Muslims and were evicted from the South by the Albanian population after the Nato bombing as they suspected them of collaborating with the Serbs. All the Roma homes in South Mitrovice have been burnt. The Roma were placed in a ramshackle tent camp built over the poisonous tailings of a lead mine. Although they now have wooden huts where eight people live in one room their lives are still harsh. The Roma are trying to integrate with the local Serbian population. Twelve children from the temporary camp where the Roma are housed were also invited to the camp. These children all came from economically disadvantaged families, some had suffered parental bereavement through accident or ill health. Integration of all these children went very smoothly despite the usual harsh and unrelenting discrimination against Roma. It was wonderful to see children who usually live and play in such an ugly, dirty area cleanly dressed, well cared for by their Roma teacher and enjoying all the pleasures of a hotel stay.

Four children with quite noticeable physical handicaps attended the holiday camps. Minera who uses a wheel chair attended the Albanian camp. She lives in a remote village and because her family have no car and the unpaved dirt roads are so bad she can not attend school or go out from her home. She lives in a darkened room cared for by her depressed mother. She so enjoyed wheeling herself around the hotel and joining in the art and craft activities with her new friends. Her mother who had come to provide the extra help she needs also gained immensely from being on holiday. She helped the other children, helped with craft work and forgot her ongoing worries. Her husband was killed by the Serbs in front of Minera a fact that the mother still finds very difficult.



Bekim a boy born with very short arms came as part of a group of ten children from the South who work on the streets selling cigarettes, peanuts and seeds to mainly restaurant patrons. Bekim joined enthusiastically in all activities, swimming with the help of flotation aids, playing ping pong at sports time and steering the excursion boat. All the street children so enjoyed being guests at the hotel dining room rather than table to table sellers. These children come from families that have become victims of the economic changes plus the effects

of the war. In another way these children also suffer from the ugly aftermath of the war as most of their business is done with soldiers placing them in a tough militarized environment.

Some of the children on the holidays still had strong feelings about what had happened to them and their families. Many children cried as they wrote letters to donors. Children from Mitrovice town talked about the homes they had had to leave in areas now claimed by the other nationality. One boy's brother was killed earlier this year when a grenade was thrown by Serbs at a military checkpoint. This boy and his brother were playing together near the checkpoint. The brother was killed instantly while he was wounded. He wrote so heartbreakingly of how it was to lose his only brother and best friend "a boy who loved life and always laughed". This boy was a part of a group of children who came from an area called little Bosnia. This is an enclave of Muslim people on the Serb part of town. They live in constant danger with grenade attacks, gunshot and physical beatings from Serbs a regular occurrence.

It wasn't easy arranging the holidays in Montenegro. Everything was very chaotic and unorganized. However the children seemed to enjoy themselves. They were so excited to be by the sea and to be staying in a hotel. They really appreciated the activities we organized for them. They were relieved to be in a safe place where they didn't have to constantly worry about another attack or outbreak of trouble. Because there is still so much hostility between the two groups. I had to assure parents that there wouldn't be any mixing between them. However I hope next year that this will be possible.