

Back to Bosnia

Trauma team finds progress as Eastern Europe repairs the ravages of war.

By WAYNE ANDERSON

Story ran on September 26, 1999

The expedition to Bosnia by plane and car took 36 hours. No longer there, however, was the 22-hour drive over shell-pocked roads with armed Serbian guards at checkpoints.

This was an encore visit for our team from the International Center for Psychosocial Trauma at the University of Missouri-Columbia led by Arshad Husain, a child psychiatrist at the MU School of Medicine. This was Husain's 20th trip and my fourth. The team included Barbara Bauer, Joseph Lamberti and Barry Jay. We ran workshops on the treatment of trauma for 100 teachers and mental-health workers from the Balkans. In addition, our team attended an international conference on mental health.

The warm reception from participants created the atmosphere of a family reunion. It was exhilarating to be back in Bosnia to see many old friends and to have the opportunity to make new ones. The University of Tuzla, which was one of the trip's sponsors, has become truly a sister institution to MU.

Physical conditions for guests in Bosnia are much improved. The hotels in both Tuzla and Sarajevo are in good repair and have hot and cold running water. There was only one power outage while we were there, a marked change from earlier visits. War-torn Bosnia and Croatia have little money for rebuilding, but visitors can see both positive and negative signs as to how well things are going.

Unseen rewards

Husain believes that training teachers and others to work with groups of victims can compensate for the lack of mental-health workers in areas of armed conflict. It was rewarding to find that our efforts have been successful. The proof was in the scientific papers read at the International Congress of the World Islamic Association for Mental Health. Supervised by faculty from the University of Tuzla, mental-health workers and teachers in Bosnia have been studying in the classroom and in the clinic what happens when the therapeutic methods we have been teaching are used with traumatized children and adults.

Study after study — 15 in all — showed that what we have been teaching about stress-management, play and art therapy, anger control and basic therapy techniques has made a significant difference in the mental health of victims of war. The MU team was especially pleased with the studies showing that children and adolescents who were trained in relaxation techniques and other psychosocial treatments had significantly fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Frequent smiles

Both Croatia and Bosnia are culturally European countries, and the ambiance in the big cities is relaxed and congenial. The centers of Zagreb, Tuzla and Sarajevo have been restored as gathering places where young couples walk hand-in-hand, older couples stroll, bands of teenagers gather, and everyone stops at the many sidewalk cafes for herbal tea, potent coffee or local beer. Small combos play both pop and traditional music, and everyone seems to have a smile for strangers. The women appeared very thin to me but looked otherwise healthy and attractive and dressed stylishly.

The relaxed approach to life helped me enjoy the foreign atmosphere. The streets seemed so much livelier and friendly than those in American cities, and it felt — and was — much safer. One evening the mayor of Tuzla and the dean of the medical school were both out and blending into the warm ambiance of the street scene.

Food was readily available. I relish Bosnian food, and there is an interesting variety of dishes accompanied by their thick, tasty pita bread.

Except for a building next to a memorial for a large group of young people killed by a shell, Tuzla today shows few signs of war. In Sarajevo, on the other hand, large areas are untouched by repair crews. But to my eyes there has been much progress in the three years since shelling stopped. In the old part of town many shops are open, selling handmade objects. It was fascinating to see how many articles can be made from brass artillery-shell casings.

Fields that had been marked with red triangles indicating land mines are now growing good crops of corn and potatoes. Villages that had been skeletons of themselves have been fleshed out, and clothes again hang on lines outside the houses. Here and there, though, a village still stands uninhabited.

Beneath the surface

Though on the surface people appear happy and adjusted, painful memories can be easily tapped. One of our translators had worked with Doctors Without Borders, translating during operations between English-speaking and Bosnian-speaking doctors. She recalled an incident under battle conditions where, because of a shortage of medical staff, she had to use her hands to keep a patient's intestines in. When she got home her mother almost fainted when she saw all of the blood on the translator's clothes, blood that she had been completely unaware of.

Our other translator, who has worked with us for more than four years, described in detail the problem of getting in and out of Sarajevo by tunnel while it was being shelled and how the Serbs had artillery zeroed in on the entrance to the trench leading to the tunnel. Many people were killed at that point.

This eagerness to share experiences, painful though they were, translated into good attention and participation in our training program, even under the 98-degree heat during

the first three days of our seminar. It was relatively easy to find people willing to be clients in our demonstrations of therapy techniques.

As trainers, we may have reactions to the strong emotions of the people we are training, but we can leave the situation and return to a relatively non-traumatic America. The teachers and mental-health workers we are training have to go right back to the pressure. This was especially true of the group who had joined us from Kosova.

Competition

Our team met with the mayor of Tuzla during our visit. A robust man, he is very popular with his constituents. He has an open-door policy, and several days a week he attempts to solve problems of employment, housing and anything else that bothers the city's residents.

One of the foreign visitors with us pointed out how much money his country had given to help develop a health center in Sarajevo. The mayor's response was to indicate how much more could have been done with the money in his province because it has 150,000 refugees and many citizens returning who went to places such as Germany during the war. It was clear there is much competition for the limited amount of support and supplies available.

One of the students in our program who spoke excellent English had a conflict I had not encountered, despite the fact that it may be common. Her father was a Bosnian Muslim and her mother a Serb. Her parents had divorced at the beginning of the war, and her mother moved to Belgrade. Just before our conference she visited her mother and was now with her father.

I could see the struggle she was having to rise above the hatred that exists between the Serbs and Bosnian Muslims so she could remain attached to families on both sides of the conflict.

I gathered that Bosnians had taken a relaxed attitude toward their Muslim religion before the war and that behaviorally there wasn't much real difference between them and the two other religious groups in the country. The war has strengthened their religious beliefs and has been a support in their time of need. It has also drawn them closer to the nations in which a more fundamentalist version of Islam is practiced.

The future

The United States has a strong presence in the area — not only because of our troops, but because of our television broadcasts. Everywhere I went there was CNN and usually MTV. Those Bosnians who can understand English may get more solid news from TV than we do. I have often wished I could see the international version of CNN because of the depth of the stories on nations around the world.

Much is still needed for the Balkans to return to normal. The people are educated and hard-working and are capable of repairing the physical damage that has been done. The emotional traumas will take much longer to mend.