

Clash of faiths

Fractured by centuries of war, some Bosnians seek peace

By Rebecca Bostic
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SANSKI MOST, Bosnia-Herzegovina — Be careful how you order coffee in this war-torn country.

“Kava,” “Kahva” or “Kafa” — the right word will get you a delicious caffeinated brew. The wrong one could make you the victim of ethnic discrimination.

Say you ordered “kafa” — the Serbian word for coffee — from a Croatian restaurant owner. He might not serve you anything at all.

The official language of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a hybrid of Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian, but some dialectic distinctions remain. Coffee — “kava” in Croatian and “kahva” in the hybrid language — is just one example.

Vahidin Omanovic, a Muslim who escaped persecution during the most recent war, is using this dialectic distinction to promote peace in Sanski Most. “Kava, Kahva, Kafa for Peace” gathers people of various ethnic groups for discussion at local coffee houses.

Omanovic is the executive director of the Center for Peacebuilding, which promotes ethnic harmony and reconciliation by bringing members of different faith and ethnic backgrounds together.

“I decided that I was going to at least, if nothing else, try to make the world a better place for the next generation of Bosnians and Herzegovinians,” he said.

Events of this kind help community members, like Mario Olmas, a Bosnian Serb, engage with those of different faiths.

“Before the war I had friends of different nationalities, but the war distorted all of that,” Olmas said. “I myself was full of prejudice when it came to other nations and I was afraid of the other people living in this country.”

After attending a peace camp, Olmas decided to dedicate himself to peace building.

“I came full of fears of how they could help me or if they would attack me there. But nothing like that happened and I managed to meet wonderful people,” he said.

Olmas described those whom he met as “people who are like-minded and for whom it mattered only that we are all humans — and only after that are we Bosnians, Catholics or Serbs.” Since the peace camp, he has worked with the Center for Peacebuilding.

“This is a hard job, especially to do this in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” he said. “It requires a lot of sacrifice on our side and lots of work because our peace building involves a face-to-face method.”

Sarajevo

About 100 miles southeast of Sanski Most, Catholic and



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Croatians, Serbians, Muslims and Jewish musicians come together for the interreligious Pontanima Choir at the Franciscan run St. Antonio Monastery in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The choir, conducted by Ivo Markovic, performs traditional songs from the Jewish, Islamic, Catholic and Serbian Orthodox traditions.

Orthodox churches, mosques and the single remaining synagogue dot the skyline of the country’s capital, Sarajevo.

Despite the war that fractured these religious communities, Franciscan Sister Zeljka Dramac believes the people will eventually reconcile.

“We live in a multi-ethnic country and we have grown up together with the Muslims and the Orthodox,” said Sr. Zeljka, a teacher in a house outside the city for at-risk youth.

“Unfortunately it exploded during the last war and it was terrible,” she added. “But even now we see that we really like that life before the war, when differences were OK.”

Muslims ruled during the reign of the Ottoman Empire, before being conquered by the predominantly Catholic Austrian-Hungarian Empire. In the 1990s, Serbia attacked Bosnia from the north in a struggle for land and power. Croatia, which borders the other side of Bosnia, and is primarily comprised of a Catholic population, responded violently.

Eventually the three ethnic religious groups fought each other for the land of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The war ended with the Dayton Peace Accord in 1995, which gave 49 percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbian Bosnians and the remaining 51 percent to Croatian Bosnians and Muslims to divide amongst themselves.

“In cities, especially in Sarajevo, we are mixed with people of different religions,” said Msgr. Marko Josipović, rector of the Catholic cathedral in the city. “We try to



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cherish coexistence, understanding, respecting one another, especially when it comes to religious identity.”

‘Seek first to understand’

In 1998, Msgr. Josipović helped organize a symposium between Catholics and Jews. The Jewish community was first “because there was no conflict with Jews,” he said.

Subsequent symposiums with Muslim scholars in 1999 followed and in the jubilee year of 2000 they held a symposium with Serbian Orthodox theologians that Jewish and Muslim scholars also attended.

Although the interreligious sym-

posiums, which have continued yearly, have helped religious leaders foster dialogue between the formerly warring factions, Msgr. Josipović believes the leaders have much to learn from their congregations when it comes to reconciliation.

“The common believers — just normal people like Muslims, Christians, Catholics, Orthodox and Jews — they have no problems communicating,” he said. “Everyday life brings these normal situations, but when you have leaders they always calculate things and it’s better when

you have people communicating normally on this level.”

Sr. Zeljka said the Franciscan fathers who brought Catholicism to the area several centuries ago laid the foundation for the recent interreligious progress.

“They were always trying to find ways to be close to the different religions, to the Muslims and the Orthodox,” she said.

“That is just Franciscan spirituality — we are open to everybody and that is it for the Franciscan monks,” Sr. Zeljka said. “They understand and they like to be like St. Francis.”

Many Franciscan monks and sisters are involved in promoting interreligious dialogue on a large scale. St. Antonio Monastery in Sarajevo even hosts the interreligious Pontanima Choir, conducted by Ivo Markovic.

The choir brings Croatians, Serbians, Muslims and Jewish musicians together to sing traditional songs from the Jewish, Islamic, Catholic and Serbian Orthodox traditions — something Sr. Zeljka said not many churches in Bosnia would allow.

Before the war in the 1990s, the different faiths lived in harmony, according to Klara Pelja, a member of the Jewish community in Sarajevo.

Pelja recently produced “Sarajevo my Golden City,” a documentary chronicling the involvement of the Jewish community in the most recent war.

“I always wanted to speak about the courage of the people in this situation, the people who lived here, because we have to be aware of the fact that we lived here for 1,325 days of hell,” Pelja said.

Alen Krstic, a Catholic scholar of theology at the Franciscan university in Sarajevo, said “trusting in the endless love of God” could bring about reconciliation.

“It is one thing to learn about religious tradition from books, but it’s completely another thing to learn... what that means to the person,” Krstic said.

“God is greater than all our thoughts and religious traditions so no one here, either as a community or an individual, is using up all that God is,” Krstic said. “We should never think that we are the only ones who know something about God.”

It is the small movements and groups of people promoting interreligious dialogue that are driving the reconciliation process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The government continues to allow religious segregation in its chambers, in the educational system and legal system, but many citizens are peacefully resisting these divisive structures. *