Looking for Forgiveness in Kosovo

By Jennifer Cline

Seeking perspectives about forgiveness in Kosovo is a bit like trying to mix oil and water. The topics just do not come together, no matter whom you approach—young children, philosophers, civic leaders, housewives, or casual laborers. Because the experiences of war are so recent, those who have lost loved ones or their homes this past year believe they cannot forgive those who have harmed them. But there is something more fundamental, as one of my Serbian friends recently reminded me. "Jennifer," she said, "this is the Balkans." She didn't have to say anything else. People here do not forgive. They live separately and record centuries of history in different walled communities. Even the smallest situations are manipulated to favor one faction's particular historical perspective.

Noel Malcolm, in his book *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), tells how both sides have used propaganda throughout the last ten years to promote political agendas. On the Serbian side, Albanians are considered terrorists and viewed as having inferior intelligence. Albanians express similar attitudes about Serbs. As Albanian mothers often explain to me: "All Serbs tell their children when they are babies that if they are not quiet the Albanians will sneak in and try to eat them."

The subject of forgiveness comes up in conversations, but sometimes in the most unusual ways. An employee fired for not doing his job showed up the next day as if nothing had happened. When asked if he understood his dismissal, his reply was almost arrogant. "Yes, I understood that I was guilty, but I think you can forgive me. People have forgiven each other for things as great as murder, surely you can forgive me now and I can go on working here."

ADRA Youth Recreation Project

It is important for the future of Kosovo that the topic of forgiveness be kept alive. In July and August 1999, the Adventist Disaster Relief Agency (ADRA) ran a Youth Recreation Project to help children from four schools deal emotionally with their traumatic experiences and move closer to a state of forgiveness. The project provided educational and art equipment for primary school students and offered them an outlet to express themselves about stress associated with the Kosovo Conflict.

With funding from the Samuel Goldwyn Foundation, ADRA in Urosevac/Ferizaj (the Serbian and Albanian names of the same village) started a new Recreation Youth Project in January 2000 that builds upon the foundation of the summer activities. Local child psychologist Nami Tahiri will lead recreational activities in twelve schools of the area and give special attention to students who have witnessed traumatic events. Several of the art projects from the summer program are reproduced in this article.

I recently tried to interview the artists to ask them about their experiences during the war and to hear their thoughts about forgiveness. I was surprised to learn on the day of the interviews that the children present were not from the school that had participated in the recreation project, but from another school. A local Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) leader, "Captain Mali," had chosen the children. (All who serve in the military go by nickname. Mali, which means "mountain," is famous for guerrilla activities in the hills outside Urosevac/Ferizaj.)

Mali brought the children into my office and explained that he could not go to the school where the pictures had been created because he had threatened the school's director while trying to take a vacated Serbian apartment illegally. Mali demonstrated how he had held the director by the throat and told me in a laughing voice that the feeling of mistrust between them had not been mended. Mali was still not welcome at the school. I decided not to ask Mali any more questions, but to interview the children he had brought, fifth graders Driton and Flutura.

Flutura's Story

Jenn: How do you know Mali?

Flutura: He is a teacher of history.

Jenn: Did he teach you last year?

Flutura: Yes.

Jenn: Do you remember anything he told you?

Flutura: He told us the past of our nation, about Scanderbeg,[1] he told us everything that happened in the past.

Jenn: Tell me about your families. Do you have brothers and sisters?

Flutura: I have a sister and a brother. My brother is eight years old and my sister three, so I'm the eldest.

Jenn: What about mum and dad? Do they work?

Flutura: Actually not! My father used to be a teacher, but Serbian authorities expelled him from the school. Afterward, he went to Greece to earn a living.

Jenn: Is your dad back from Greece?

Flutura: No, he's still abroad. He went from Greece to Germany. Maybe he'll come soon.

Jenn: How long since you have seen him?

Flutura: I haven't seen him for two years. I saw him in Germany during the war.

Jenn: Can you imagine the moment he comes back?

Flutura: I cannot imagine that moment, because we will be a complete family. He would have worked here, but Serbs didn't allow him. Now freedom is here so he can return to his pupils. Many Albanians now have jobs.

Jenn: Before the war, what did you want to do but couldn't?

Flutura: I wanted my dad to stay here with us and I wanted us children to go to school freely, but we never could.

Jenn: When the bombs started did you go anywhere special?

Flutura: After bombing began I stayed at home the first eleven days.

Jenn: Tell me about NATO bombing.

Flutura: When the bombing began, I was with my uncle in Kacanik, where the Serbs have massacred many people, including two of my uncles. (Flutura stopped talking because she was crying.) Afterward, we went back home because we had left our grandma, who is sick and very fat. I was very afraid of the bombs. My house was near the Serbian military barracks, so we could hear the noise very well when the bombs fell. Many families who fled their homes slept in ours.

Jenn: How many families slept at your home?

Flutura: Five.

Jenn: How many rooms were there?

Flutura: Three rooms. The following day after they came, the families set out for Macedonia but failed because the train was already full, so they had to return. After some days we went to the village of Pleshina to visit my aunt because she was pregnant and we'd been worried about her. As a matter of fact, it was quieter there and more secure then at home. While going there we went through the village of Dubrava. We stopped when we saw Serbian paramilitary soldiers on the road with their vehicles.

In the meantime, we saw some red stuff near a big house. We supposed it was some kind of explosion, and some minutes later heard strong explosions and saw that a large part of the house was ruined. We saw the bodies of three dead people accidentally killed by explosions. It was the most terrible day of my life. My mum tried to close my brother's eyes but he could see everything. We stayed five days in Pleshina to take care of my pregnant aunt. We saw the dead bodies again when we returned home.

The following day we joined our uncles and went to the railway station to catch the train for Macedonia. When the train arrived—at 3 p.m. instead of 7 a.m.—it was full of passengers, so there was no chance to get on. When we returned home we realized that Serbian police had demolished our neighbors' houses during the day, but strangely left ours intact.

The next day we made another effort to get on the train for Macedonia, but we failed again and, because it was full, only six people were allowed to get on. There were three busses at the train station, but we did not have courage to get on because they were driven by Serbs. One of our acquaintances persuaded us to get on anyway, and we obeyed because we didn't have a choice. So we finally set out for Macedonia.

When we reached the small town of Hani i Elezit, Serbian police ordered us to walk in columns of two across the railroad, which had mines nearby. The walk lasted two and one-half hours until we arrived in Bllaca, on the Macedonian border. During this time we saw old dead people who had been thrown into some kind of stream. It was terrible to see. In Bllaca we were circled by mixed wires[2] so we couldn't move. We could stand up only by police order. There were about three hundred people there.

After three hours, the police came and ordered us to pass through mixed wires, but they caught mum's jacket. She couldn't walk, so we went back to help. She had to leave her jacket and all of her luggage, but we finally went all together into Macedonia. We were lucky because we had passports, but some of our neighbors did not. When we entered Macedonia, the authorities separated people with passports, on one side, from those who had none.

In Macedonia, we stayed one month in a camp. Then we saw our names on a list of people who needed to go to Belgium, but we refused to go. After some days our names were on the list for Turkey, but we refused to go there as well. The third time our names were on the list for the Czech Republic, where we finally decided to go because we had no other solutions.

Our dad paid someone four thousand DM to pick us up in the Czech Republic and send us to Germany, where we stayed for about three months.

We returned to Kosova in September and two weeks later started going to the school.

Driton's Story

We were in the village of Bitia when the Serbian military and Arkan's paramilitary troops came and killed two uncles, a brother of my dad and a brother of my mum.[3]

Arkan's paramilitary troops threatened my fifteen-year-old brother with a knife and I closed my eyes. After that, they sent us to Ferizaj, where they gave us some food but took away my brother and sent him to an unknown place.

Fortunately, we met him when we reached Albania. He told us that the Serbian police sent him there. My five-year-old sister remained here in Ferizaj because she couldn't get onto the train. She was hindered by the crowd, which was also fleeing to Macedonia. After a while, a stranger from the Drenica region took her to the Albanian border. When we heard about that, we went there and got her.

After our family was reunited, our father came to Albania and took us with him to Switzerland. We have heard that the Serbian paramilitary troops took another of my uncles from a column of people and sent him to prison, where he still is—or so we think. I have to tell you that my grandma was killed, too. I loved her so much.

Forgiveness

Jenn: Now, I'm going to ask you a question about forgiveness.

Driton: Yes, we know what it is.

Jenn: Please describe it to me!

Driton: I know that forgiveness exists in the world but people have done terrible things.

Jenn: I'm not asking you about what they've done. I'm asking you what you understand about forgiveness.

Driton: It is good to forgive when things get changed.

Jenn: What is your opinion about forgiveness.

Flutura: I think that forgiveness is very good.

Jenn: Has anybody ever done anything wrong to you and you forgave them?

Flutura: There were some cases that I've forgiven.

Jenn: Is it a hard thing to do?

Flutura: No, it isn't.

Jenn: Are some things easier to forgive than others?

Flutura: Yes.

Jenn: What do you think is easier to forgive?

Driton: It is easier to forgive a friend, but it is harder to forgive someone who has done something very bad to you!

Jenn: Now, as we end, do you have any questions you would like to ask me?

Flutura: Yes. Thank all of you who have come here to help us and who have saved our lives.

Jenn: Have you any hope in your heart?

Flutura: Right now I have a lot of hope.

Driton: I'm very happy because now we live in freedom. I'm very happy even though I have lost my uncles and grandma.

Jenn: Does anything else make you happy, for example playing with toys?

Driton: No, only ball. I like soccer.

Jenn: What do you want to do when you grow up?

Driton: I would like to be a teacher!

Jenn: A teacher! Of what subject?

Driton: Albanian linguistic and math.

Jenn: Albanian linguistic is harder than math. Would you teach me Albanian?

Driton: Yes.

Notes and References

1. Scanderbeg (1404–68), also known as George Castriota (Kastriotes) or Iskander Bey, was an Albanian national hero admired for leading resistance against Ottoman Turkish rule.

2. That is, barbed wire.

3. Serbian warlord Zeljko Raznatovic Arkan, who was recently assassinated in Belgrade, gained notoriety with his "Tiger" commandos for guerilla activities during the Bosnian War. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) does not have evidence that Arkan and his troops worked in this region of Kosovo. Serbian police were most likely responsible for the deaths that Flutura discusses.

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