

AN INFUSION OF DIALOGUES

BOSNIANS IN DIALOGUE MEET HOLOCAUST DESCENDANTS IN DIALOGUE

By Paula Green

In an unusual, highly charged and successful experiment in dialogue infusion, a group of Muslim and Serb educators who participate in inter-ethnic dialogue met for four days with members of a German and Jewish second-generation Holocaust dialogue group. The meeting was arranged and facilitated by the author, Dr. Paula Green, director of Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, who works with both groups. Ann Hoewing from the Foundation for Community Encouragement co-facilitated, with translation by Lutvija Rokov and Vesna Arsovski of Zagreb, Croatia.

The Bosnian dialogue group, the Project for Dialogue and Community Building (Project DiaCom) consists of educators from the cities of Sanski Most in the Bosnian Federation and Prijedor in the Serb Republic, the two entities currently comprising Bosnia. The post-Holocaust group, One by One, meets in the US and Germany and includes members whose families were directly affected by the Holocaust.

I initiated the Bosnian Dialogue Project three years ago at the request of Serb and Muslim educators whose previously intertwined lives have been split asunder by the violence that destroyed Bosnia. They wished to explore relations and to prepare their schools for the arduous tasks of repatriation and restoration of community. For the One by One group, I have facilitated advanced dialogues for members to deepen their relationships. Some participants also wanted to explore the relevance of their experiences in dialogue for others suffering from the legacies of war.

Issues in Inter-Ethnic Dialogue

In assembling this mix of dialogue groups, several questions interested me. Observing the skills of the One by One group in the dialogue process and the intimacy many of them have achieved across seemingly impossible barriers, I wondered what they could model and teach to the Bosnians. Most of the German and Jewish members of One by One are second generation survivors of the Holocaust or people whose parents were engaged in the Third Reich. Very few of the One by One group are first generation, or those who directly participated in the slaughter or survived the concentration camps. The Bosnians, on the other hand, are all immediate victims or members of by-stander or perpetrator families, or perpetrators themselves. In both Project DiaCom and One by One, there are few histories of rescuers.

What is the relationship between dialogue and cultural norms? The second generation Jewish and German One by One members frequently develop their skills through a process of psychotherapy, group work and the norms of subcultures comfortable with self-disclosure and emotional expression. The Bosnians come from extended family clans, fifty years of Communism and limited experience with structured group process. As Milka, a Serb educator reminded me, *“We were taught not to interfere with public policies, express our emotions, or talk about our problems outside the confines of the family.”*

Another question that concerns peacebuilders is the influence of the passage of time on dialogue and the healing process. The Bosnian war ended five years ago. In Bosnia, memories are immediate, the destruction visible and the wounds palpable. For the

Germans and Jews, more than fifty years have passed. The dialogue participants are descendants of victims and perpetrators. What is the right time to begin inter-ethnic dialogue after war? When it is too soon? What factors of time and readiness need to be considered in beginning dialogue besides the request of the participants and the need for safety?

The political and economic environment in which dialogue is embedded clearly affects the process and outcome. Unlike Holocaust descendants, Bosnians must create a shared future as neighbors. Adding to their burdens, Bosnians face struggle with a stagnant economy, shattered infrastructure and a demoralized, unemployed population. The international community seems resistant to prosecute war criminals and to provide the long-term fiscal, political, judicial and psychological support essential for recovery. In this atmosphere, dialogue stands outside the norms of ongoing estrangement and lack of cooperation. A dialogue participant observed that if Sanski Most and Prijedor remain economically marginalized and the 80-90% unemployment rate does not shift, *“we will keep on electing the same old nationalist politicians.”*

Cooperation, empathy and compassion, hopeful fruits of the dialogue process, do not flow easily in times of deprivation and struggle. Furthermore, dialogue partners frequently experience family and community pressure not to cooperate with the perceived enemy, and politicians protecting their own lives or interests can threaten dialogue members with loss of jobs or worse. Split loyalties that ripped apart mixed Bosnian families during the war now tug at families around issues of inter-ethnic relationship-building, an issue also familiar to One by One. In the best of circumstances, dialogue would be supported and augmented by public rituals of peacebuilding such as Days of Mourning, Memorials, Truth Commissions and trials for war criminals. This is not the case in Bosnia, at least in the present moment.

In an informal discussion after a One by One dialogue, a Jewish group member remarked that he wished healing and peacebuilding efforts had existed after World War II. He believed that his parents' lives as Holocaust survivors might have been eased if structures had existed to ease the transition away from the unrelenting violence and dehumanization of the concentration camps. My colleague did not envision his parents in dialogue with Germans but wished there had been some care and attention for their devastated emotions. He commented: *“had my parents received psychological support during these years I might have had a childhood less damaged by the Holocaust.”*

His remarks encouraged my thinking that One by One might have experiences useful to the Bosnian participants in Project DiaCom who struggle so bravely to speak to each other. I sensed that the Jewish and German group could bear witness to the importance of telling the truth in the first generation, to the legacy of unprocessed trauma and to the betrayals caused by family secrets, lies and distorted histories. It was on this basis that I invited One by One to select delegates to accompany me to Bosnia. An unexpected benefit was the effect that the Bosnians would have on the One by One group, opening a way to their own future of service to others.

Public Presentations

In October 2000, two German and two Jewish members met me in Sanski Most for four intense days of dialogue with Project DiaCom. Preceding and following our days in this region of northern Bosnia, we arranged for One by One to speak in Zagreb, Croatia and Sarajevo, Bosnian Federation, two capital cities that also survived war and have long histories of victimization and perpetration. Unlike Sanski Most and Prijedor, members of the Jewish community still live in Sarajevo and Zagreb, adding a poignancy to our

presentations there. A Zagreb Jewish elder unexpectedly appeared at our hotel breakfast the next morning, laden with gifts of Sephardic music for Jewish and German One by One members and filled with tears of gratitude for our witness and dialogue work.

Another layer of history complicating relationships was Serb resistance to German aggression, the German World War II bombing of Serbia, the fascist government of Croatia, and the Croatian Jasenovac concentration camp where Jews, Serbs and Roma met their death. In addressing Serbs, especially in the Serbian Republic city of Prijedor, we noted the irony of German citizens whose parents were Nazis speaking to Serbs whose parents were victims of Nazism but whose present-day members were perpetrators of ethnic violence against Bosnian Muslims. The lesson for all of us as peacebuilders is the repetitive nature of genocidal violence, with victim and perpetrator groups rotating roles, and the themes of revenge and collective trauma present either consciously or in the collective identity of the community.

Prijedor gained notoriety as a center of war crimes and ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian War. Formerly a well-integrated city of 100,000 Muslim and Serb Bosnians, 58,000 Muslims were expelled from Prijedor early in the war. Most of the survivors now live 30 minutes away in Sanski Most, another previously mixed city from which Serbs were pushed or fled toward the end of the war. Predominately Muslim villages surrounding Prijedor lie in ruin, heaps of rubble marking former homes, schools and mosques. While the Dayton Accords allow repatriation, enormous psychological and physical obstacles block the process of return. There are no welcoming banners inviting Muslims or Serbs to reclaim their occupied or destroyed homes on either side.

In Sanski Most, we met each day with our dialogue leaders-in-training and with educators who had participated in at least one previous Project DiaCom workshop. In the evenings we gave public presentations in both cities, one to a largely Muslim audience and the other mainly Serb. Because the Serbs in Prijedor almost uniformly deny their responsibility for the expulsion of 58,000 Muslims and the presence of several concentration camps inside their city, the public talk in Prijedor was especially difficult.

A Serb responded to our presentation angrily: *“The Serbs have never caused any war in history, since the days of Kosovo Polje. (1389). We have always defended ourselves—victims in World War II like the Jews. We have never been aggressors.”*

A Muslim listener remarked to the largely Serb audience: *“How do we tell the truth to these young people here? (Serb high school students brought by our trainees). New York and Berlin know more about the truth than people here.”* (Referring to the censored media of the Milosevic era and the silence of the Serb population).

In these venues, the One by One presenters told their personal stories, allowed their emotions to surface and maintained their equanimity and balance in the face of challenges and denial. As moderator, I felt it appropriate that we not become involved in responses that would lead to counter-arguments. Encouraging reflection and stimulating dialogue between local residents was the hoped-for result of the One by One presentations. Observing post-Holocaust dialogue partners who obviously care deeply about each other gave hope to people who feel helpless in the face of their extreme estrangement from each other. Listening to the Jews talk about the effects of multi-generational trauma and the Germans speak about the legacy of falsified history offered guidance to Bosnians struggling to raise children, to speak about the war, to give words to the carnage visible on every street. *“How do we tell the truth,”* a participant asked. *“Help us not wait for 50 years.”* A fifteen-year-old student countered: *“I don’t want any more information about the war. I have lived it for ten years. I’ve heard of my*

grandparents' past and I'm not proud of it but I can't do anything about it." We offered no simplistic answers for their anguish, but acknowledged the possibility of finding their own wisdom through extended conversation and reflection.

In Dialogue

For the educators-in-training closely involved in Project DiaCom who will take over the project fully in the coming years, observing the closeness between Jewish and German dialogue partners touched them deeply. Currently the Muslim and Serb educators, formerly colleagues, neighbors and sometimes relatives, feel quite estranged from each other. They live in separate cities in different political entities, and carry different traumas from the same war: the trauma of victimization and profound loss and the trauma of involuntary membership in the perpetrating ethnic group. Our Muslim members yearn to receive acknowledgement of wrongdoing by Serbs whereas the Serb members continue to deny the atrocities and the extent of Serbian perpetration in this region of Bosnia. We had hoped that the great risks of honesty taken by One by One members and their commitment to dialogue and to each other would inspire the Bosnians, as indeed they did.

In a closed session with the ten Bosnian dialogue leaders-in-training, the four One by One members and the facilitation and translation team, we worked steadily at exploring relations. A One by One member from Germany, a retired Lutheran minister who had been a member of the Hitler Youth, began his presentation in tears. Gottfried apologized to the Serbs for German aggression in World War II and to the Muslims for Germany's and the world's complicity in standing by and thus allowing the destruction of Bosnia. Ilona, the other German One by One presenter, spoke of her love for her father and the utter betrayal she experienced when she learned of his Nazi past. She mentioned the shame and the silence of bystanders and offered her concern for the next generation. *"The younger generation will carry the guilt of their parents if the parents do not deal with their own guilt."*

A Jewish member of One by One who came originally from Romania and felt vulnerable in this former-Communist Eastern Europe setting, brought tears to everyone's eyes with her description of her mother's inability to recover from the concentration camps and the consequent effect on her own life. At that point one of the Muslim men took an emotional risk by noting that the Serbs showed more concern for Mary whom they had just met than they did for his suffering, although he is a long-term group member. *"Our group shows more compassion for the Jews of One by One than for victims here—our stories are no less touching than theirs."* Watching the Serbs turn away from Mohammed's pain-filled eyes, we intervened as facilitators to encourage the group to pay attention to the statement and to their own response. For the Serbs, acknowledging Mohammed's victimization meant telling themselves the truth about Prijedor as a city of war crimes. To let in that knowledge apparently stimulated anguish, shame and guilt. It is hard to bear so much reality, agonizing to be a bystander feeling powerless to stop the downward spiral of violence. Frequently in our lives, we are all bystanders.

Partiality to All Participants

We cannot successfully build a future without acknowledgement of the past. We must incorporate history into honest peacebuilding. In several years as an outsider invited by Bosnians to facilitate Project DiaCom dialogues, my greatest challenge has been *"multi-partiality."* I must find a way to stand with the Muslims as victims in the Bosnian war in this region. Their trust rests on my communicating to them that I believe their stories and testimonies, that my eyes see their mass graves, destroyed homes and broken hearts. At

the same time I must be present to the humanity and sensitivity of Serb participants and not push acknowledgement too quickly, for then they back away and I lose their trust. They need my compassion and my understanding that it is devastating to be a member of a perpetrating group, caught in the chaos of a senseless war. The Serb participants have also experienced loss of family members, homes and jobs in recent years. They have been taught by the Milosevic regime to believe what appeared in their media and to experience themselves as historic victims. I understand they do not know what or whom to believe. I remember the silence in Germany after the war. I know that the US remains silent about Hiroshima, Vietnam, slavery and other massive violations of human rights.

One by One taught me something of the depth of perpetrator groups' suffering. I see how much anguish German members carry about the behavior of their family members and their nation. I know they long to heal these wounds and to experience themselves as good people, not through denial but through facing history. Their message to the Bosnians states that the path to forgiveness and restoration of dignity and community lies through acknowledgement and atonement. Children must learn the truth of violence committed by their elders and the truth of victimhood endured by the family. Repressed family and communal history re-enacts itself, generation after generation. Traumas are inherited. Ghosts emerge, demanding revenge. Only the truth can set us free.

A Turning Point

Could this message be realized among our ten Sanski Most and Prijedor educators-in-training five years after the Bosnian War? It required another risk by a Muslim participant, a woman whom I shall call Vera because her name must be withheld. The day after the One by One members left, we had one more day with the educators-in-training, the group with whom we have devoted the most energy in the past three years. Vera told a story she had never before uttered, a story of unbelievable trauma and fear that remains in her body, sending her into periodic episodes of despair and shock. As she poured out her anguish, a young Muslim participant held her and cried with her, for her experience and for the thirty-six members of his immediate family lost in the war. My heart reeled with the intensity of what I was hearing while my mind remained watchful of the participants. The Serbs, all five of whom were women, were avoiding eye contact. One of them buried her face by taking notes.

My co-trainer and I knew we had reached a critical moment for intervention. The ground under us seemed to shake with emotion. One by One, no longer physically present, remained with us as invisible witnesses. If the group could not respond to this outpouring of agony, if the Serb group members remained frozen in their fear and divided loyalties, we could not move forward as a group of potential facilitators. If we could not go through this pivotal incident together, we saw that the Muslim and Serb members of the group would remain separated in alienation and despair, unable to join each other at this moment in their history.

By an act of grace I found the words to help the Serb women find release from their shame and helplessness so they could reach out to Vera. Nada bravely rose and crossed the room to embrace Vera. Nada, probably the most capable of the Serb future facilitators, said to Vera as she held her: "*What my parents suffered in World War II was terrible, but not as tragic as your experience.*" In this important moment of inter-ethnic peacebuilding Nada acknowledged that Vera's story was true and also that she had been comparing this ethnic cleansing with that of her parents' experience as victims fifty years earlier. Milka, the Serb educator in the group closest to her feelings, through a burst of tears asked her Muslim colleagues for forgiveness and reconciliation. From this

crescendo of emotion, the group members transitioned to a time of quiet reflection and thence to a necessary break.

In the closing circle that followed, Faik, a male math teacher from Sanski Most said: *“One by One gave me the courage to tell my story. Our listening guidelines are the core of our work; we must listen to each other.”* Nada acknowledged the shattering that must come on the path ahead in order to break through: *“I feel upset, maybe some dilemmas in myself. My head is chaotic. I thought I was really happy—a good husband, two kids, good work, everything okay. Now I feel broken and I must be with my new feelings to find out what has happened to me. I don’t know whether my happiness was a real happiness.”*

Reflections

Returning to the US and Germany, the One by One members reflected on their experience. Mary wrote eloquently:

Had I not gone to Sanski Most and Prijedor, I could have still maintained some of my innocence. But I was there and I cannot unlearn what I know and that is that genocide is still possible fifty years after Auschwitz, and the Holocaust is over only in as much as each of us has learned its lessons. There is a great risk in our ignoring what is happening and allowing the evil of genocide to seep even deeper into our souls. In a world plagued by people who are willing to set aside their humanity and slaughter their neighbor we are all being called to action.

In this experiment in multi-level dialogue infused with the history of two genocides, the members of One by One found a significant application of lessons learned for others recovering from war and betrayal. The Project DiaCom members experienced a degree of intimacy among former enemies and their descendants previously unimaginable to them, and participated in acknowledging their own tragic past as a bridge to Bosnian healing and community restoration. We as facilitators stood in awe of all the participants: Muslims, Serbs, Jews and Germans as they wove a new story from their intertwined histories, this one committed to honesty, introspection, civic responsibility and compassion. We learned the value of multi-partiality in dialogue, remembering that there is no life without suffering, especially in war, and that the journey to healing may begin with a single phrase: *Yes, this tragedy happened. I acknowledge your experience. I accept your truth.*

We do not use the language of forgiveness and reconciliation, but rather select more present-oriented words such as relationship, community building, collaboration and healing. I sense that forgiveness and reconciliation, if they develop, grow out of this larger journey of rebuilding trust and restoring relations. I believe that we cannot wait fifty years for the second generation to undertake the healing process, and indeed postponement is a sacrifice of the second generation. Wounds pile upon wounds and the cleansing becomes even more difficult. I believe we need public rituals to bind the community as well as private events like dialogue to strengthen collegial bonds and encourage collaborative development. It is difficult but not impossible to interrupt the cycle of blame, hatred and revenge, and to balance out the needs for punishment and compassion. My commitment to inter-ethnic dialogue rests in the hope that transformation will emerge through connection and caring.

Dr. Paula Green is the Director of Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, a Professor at the School for International Training and Co-Director of CONTACT, a Peacebuilding

*Institute and Certificate Program at the School for International Training in Vermont,
USA.*